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Exploring the Personal Dynamics of Project Initiation Decisions

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Exploring the Personal Dynamics of Project Initiation Decisions

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Doctor of Philosophy

Abstract

The focus of this study is on the role of individuals in making project initiation decisions. The decision to proceed with a project is critical, and the up-front process of initiation has been identified as having a dominant influence in determining the success or failure of individual project efforts. The process of project initiation lives at the intersection between organizational strategy and project management, and from different perspectives often appears to be part of one or the other, at times can be argued to belong to both, and occasionally seems to belong to neither. This study seeks to explore how individual actors engage in and support the process of making effective project initiation decisions.

The study employed grounded theory methodology to develop a substantive theory of how agency and rule emphasis influence the effectiveness of project initiation decisions. Data collection involved interviews with 28 participants who were each involved in the initiation of projects in their organizations, who discussed the process within their organizations of deciding to initiate projects, and described their role within that process. The results show that decision effectiveness is a result of the effectiveness of process and rule systems within an organization, and the agency of individual actors supporting the initiation process. Agency represents the intention, ability and capacity to act – and the corresponding level of awareness – within the rule environment of the organization. Agency reflects the willingness of actors to work within, around or despite the dominant rule system. Agency can work to support the influences of process effectiveness or rule effectiveness, and agency can also override and compensate for organizational inadequacies. Agency can supplement rule effectiveness where required to support effective decisions in implicitly-focussed environments, and can also be constrained in explicitly-focussed environments that have a strong process capability in place.

This study contributes to the project management and strategy literature by opening up the black box of the project initiation decision and demonstrating how individuals, processes and structures interact. It introduces decision making theory to the project management realm in ways that were previously unexplored, in order to increase understanding of how strategic project initiation decisions are made. The study also confirms the presence of the “project shaper” role –initially identified by Smith and Winter (2010) – as a champion of the initiation of projects. In addition, the

study contributes to the understanding of agency, not just as a means of managing uncertainty and compensating for perceived organizational inadequacies, but also in its ability to be constrained in the face of very formal and consistent processes, or perceived as limited as a result of personal attributes or external constraints. Finally, the study provides empirical support to previous studies that propose a link between personality and agency, explores the stewardship component of the exercise of agency, and demonstrates how it is operationalized by actors at all levels of the organization rather than solely at the boardroom table or in the executive suite.

Declaration

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material which has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

Mark Edward Mullaly

19 December 2012

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

This study explores an essential middle process that exists between the domains of strategy and project management. The decision to proceed with a project is critical, and the up-front process of initiation has been identified as having a dominant influence in determining the success or failure of individual project efforts. The focus of this study is the process of project initiation: it seeks to explore the rule systems that influence the operation of the this process, the roles that are involved in the process, and how individual actors perceive and approach their roles. Finally, the study seeks to offer a substantive-level theory of how agency and rule emphasis influence the effectiveness of project initiation decisions.

Literature Review

Project management is about decision making, but research suggests that there are numerous challenges in how decisions are made in a project environment. There is broad support for the need to further explore the area of decision making, as a means of developing a broader understanding of how projects are managed (see, for example, Andersen, Dysvik, & Vaagaasar, 2009; Brady & Maylor, 2010; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil & Marshall, 2005; Drummond, 1996; Gerald, Maylor, & Williams, 2011; McCray, Purvis, & McCray, 2002; Miranda & Hillman, 1996; Muller, Spang, & Ozcan, 2009; Perminova, Gustafsson, & Wikström, 2008; Schofield & Wilson, 1995; Shenhar, Tishler, Dvir, Lipovetsky, & Lechler, 2002; Smith & Winter, 2010; Thomas, Delisle, Jugdev, & Buckle, 2002; Tiwana, Wang, Keil, & Ahluwalia, 2007; van Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk, 2008; Williams & Samset, 2010). From its roots in the management, and particularly the control, of large-scale industrial and military projects (Morris, 1994), there have been increasing calls for project management to better reflect the lived reality and actual approaches of project managers (Brady & Söderlund, 2008; Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, & Hodgson, 2006; Hodgson & Cicmil, 2008; Maylor, 2001; Söderlund, 2004b; Thomas, 2000; Winter, Smith, Morris, & Cicmil, 2006). Particular areas of concern are how we decide to initiate projects, and how we ensure that the projects that are chosen are the right ones for the organization (Arto & Wikström, 2005; Aubry, Sicotte, Drouin, Vidot-Delerue, & Besner, 2012; Cooper, Edgett, & Kleinschmidt, 2000; Crawford, Hobbs, & Turner, 2006). Improved framing of project initiation decisions requires a

better understanding of the link between projects and organizational strategy (Morris, Jamieson, & Shepherd, 2006), including an understanding of the influence of political processes on initiation decisions (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006), and of the broader context in which project results will be implemented (Winter & Szczepanek, 2008). It has been argued that the development of the project concept is possibly the most critical stage associated with the project, and the one likely to have the greatest impact on project success or failure (Williams & Samset, 2010). An extensive literature of decision making provides insight into how these explorations may be best approached.

Coincidentally, decision making has much in common with project management as a discipline; both emerged from the broader domains of operations research in the years following World War II (Simon, 1965; Simon, 1987). Like project management, decision making has also been broadly criticized for its emphasis on rational and normative modes of research at the expense of more subjective or interpretive views (see, for example Cyert & Hedrick, 1972; Lindblom, 1959; Lindblom, 1979; Nelson & Winter, 1974; Simon, 1955; Simon, 1959; Simon, 1965). These critiques led to the development of a number of behavioural models of decision making, the most influential of which were products of what became to be known as the “Carnegie School,” embracing and embodying the work of Simon, Cyert & March (Winter, 1971). Of particular note were their three seminal works on decision making and organization, including *Administrative Behavior* (Simon, 1947/1997), *Organizations* (March & Simon, 1958/1993) and *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm* (Cyert & March, 1963/1992). The latter work introduced the idea of decisions as a product of organizational routines and rules, which offers a particularly useful lens through which to observe the process of organizational decision making.

Initial Study Purpose

At the outset, the primary purpose of this study was to present a grounded theory of project initiation based upon an understanding how those involved in initiating projects perceive the process and their role within it, and the influences that they as actors have on the project initiation process.

The research questions that have emerged in framing this study are:

- What are the roles of power, personality and rules in the process of project initiation?
- How do executives perceive their roles and the rules associated with those roles, and how do individual differences influence approaches to decision making?

Grounding The Research Questions

This study began with a desire to better understand decision making, and particularly the means through which project initiation decisions evolve. While there is a clear call within the project management literature to further explore the project initiation process, to date few studies have actually focussed upon understanding the dynamics of this process and its underlying influences. Drawing on the literatures of project management and decision making, this research study was framed to examine the influences of organizational rule systems and personal influences on project initiation decisions.

Understanding the Influence of Power and Politics on Project Initiation

Within the project management literature, there have been several calls to explore and better understand the influence of power dynamics (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Walker, Anbari et al., 2008; Walker, Cicmil, Thomas, Anbari, & Bredillet, 2008). It has been suggested that power and politics have a significant influence on the governance and management of projects, and provide support for on-going legitimization of projects and practices (Cicmil, Hodgson, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2009; Thomas, 1998; Williams, Klakegg, Magnussen, & Glasspool, 2010). The decision making literature also provides support for the notion of legitimization as a product of the influence of power and politics; the framing and reinforcement of rule systems have been described as being predominantly influenced by "elites" within the organization (Burns & Dietz, 1992; Nutt, 1993b). Rule systems are viewed as sensitive to context, and responsive to power dynamics within organizations (Nelson & Winter, 2002). Rule systems can also be means of legitimizing asymmetric distributions of power (Cohen et al., 1996). Understanding the decision making environment within an organization therefore requires an appreciation of the political environment (Cohen et al., 1996; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Fredrickson, 1986; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Théorêt, 1976).

This study was designed to explore how power is exercised particularly within the context of project initiation decisions, and how it shapes the perceptions and actions of those involved in the initiation process.

Understanding the Influence of Personality on Project Initiation

Personality has been identified in a number of contexts as influencing how decision makers approach their roles. In the project management literature, for example, Muller et al. (2009) highlight differences in decision making style of project managers as being attributable to personality. In the decision making literature, it has been suggested that in environments where there are multiple levels of self-interest, decision makers need a clear sense of their objectives, which are in part influenced by their personal preferences (March, 1987). Bourgeois and Eisenhardt (1988; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988) observe influences of personality as well as politics in the decision making behaviour of executive teams. Personality and preferences of the decision maker have also been observed to have an influence on how the individual makes decisions (Nutt, 1993a). Lastly, Langley et al. (1995) highlight the exploration of differences in decision makers as an area neglected in the literature, calling for research exploring the influence of different types of personalities on decision making.

This study was intended in part to seek to understand how personality contributes to the actions and decisions of those involved in the project initiation process.

Understanding the Influence of Rules on Project Initiation

Evolutionary principles were introduced to sociology in order to develop a theory of “the firm” that was consistent with historical analysis and actual observed patterns of behaviour, and it was here that rule following as a decision making concept emerged (Nelson & Winter, 1973). The assumption that firms have “decision rules,” which are retained or replaced through satisficing, provides a basis for both stability where the rules are seen as appropriate and evolution when they are no longer effective (Winter, 1971). Proponents argue that strategic decision processes are rooted in patterns of behaviour that are understood and visible at the executive level of the firm, and provide stability in the face of turnover and the behaviours of individual actors (Fredrickson & Mitchell, 1984). Eisenhardt (1989) argued that these routines reflect recurring patterns among executives that profoundly influence strategic decision making and ultimately firm performance. They also have the

potential to embed ideologies, which can at extremes substitute for actual decisions (Brunsson, 1982), and result in actors behaving in ways which are unreflective and nonadaptive (Starbuck, 1983).

Overall, however, rules provide a useful lens to understand decision making as an interaction of individual and system influences, where decision rules are a product of power, social interactions and material conditions (Burns & Dietz, 1992). As a result, decision making rules also allow for the exploration of agency, and the degree to which actors perceive flexibility and room to act within the rule system (Dietz & Burns, 1992). Decision rules would appear to provide a useful perspective in understanding the integration between strategy and project, an understanding of politics and a means of exploring the lived experiences of those making initiation decisions.

In the project management literature, it has been suggested that heuristics and biases operating outside of the awareness of the decision maker can still have significant influences on how decisions are made (McCray et al., 2002). The broader organizational culture is also seen to influence decision making, highlighting the importance of context in understanding how rules are shaped (Andersen et al., 2009). As has already been suggested, organizational decision rules are seen to play an important role in both establishing and maintaining the contextual influences that shape decisions (Burns & Dietz, 1992; Dietz & Burns, 1992; Winter, 1971). The study of rule systems provides a greater contextual understanding within which to explore the dynamics of organizations (Nelson & Winter, 2002).

This study endeavoured to explore the project initiation process through an examination of the rules systems that are at work within organizations, and an investigation into how these systems are perceived by those involved with initiation decisions, and how they interact with them.

Exploring the Interpretation of Initiation Roles

Roles are instrumental to the understanding of rules systems within organizations, and the constraints and opportunities that individual actors perceive within rule systems in the roles they adopt (Burns & Dietz, 1992; Dietz & Burns, 1992; Winter, 1971). A recent exploration of the influence of roles in project initiation decisions in the project management literature highlighted the "project shaper" as a role designed to support and champion opportunities within the project initiation process (Smith & Winter, 2010). The current study also sought to explore the degree

to which the project shaper role is observed by participants within the project initiation process, the influences on this role and the approaches by which it is performed.

Evaluating the Influence of Individual Differences

The study's approach was grounded in a desire to understand several different personal influences of actors involved in the project initiation process, including power, personality and perception of roles. It has been argued that effective decision makers are personally inspired (Langley, 1995). Those involved in decision making roles seek spaces and opportunities where they are able to make a difference (Clegg, 2006; Dietz & Burns, 1992). This study was initially designed to understand how personal differences influence how those who are involved in the project initiation process are perceived, the impact that these differences have on decision making.

The Methodological Approach

The methodological approach to this study is rooted in grounded theory. Grounded theory was developed as a sociological method for the development of theory from data, seeking a middle ground between critiques of qualitative studies as being "subjective" and "impressionistic," and the then dominant emphasis on quantitative theory verification (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999). Specifically, the approach of this study employs the application of a Straussian interpretation of grounded theory as articulated by Corbin and Strauss (2008). The objective of the research was to develop a substantive-level theory of personal influences associated with the process of project initiation.

My search for an appropriate method by which to explore the research questions in this study led to the decision to adopt a grounded theory approach. After I had completed the literature review, it became clear that many of the questions that presented themselves would require investigation into "how" the phenomenon of decision making with respect to project initiation occurs. The role of qualitative research is to support the exploration and interpretation of human experiences (Creswell, 1998). Exploration of the traditions and approaches available suggested a number of potential strategies, including phenomenology, case study research and grounded theory (Creswell, 1998). Grounded theory was considered most promising for its emphasis on the development of a theoretical interpretation of the

phenomenon under study; the intention of a grounded theory is to explain as well as describe (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). By means of a comprehensive exploration of the project initiation process and the capturing of rich descriptions of the experiences of participants, the study was designed to provide an interpretation of how individuals approach their role and influence the outcomes associated with initiating projects.

An interview plan comprised of open, semi-structured questions regarding the project initiation process served as an initial framework for the study. It allowed me to explore issues with participants that drew upon the major themes and problem areas that had emerged from the literature review. This included incorporation of a strategic decision making scenario that was developed with the intention that it would be broadly relevant to participants in order to provide comparability across organizations. Participants would describe how initiation of a project of the scope and scale of the one described would be approached within their organizations, and particularly how they would approach their involvement in an assignment of that nature. Through a process of constant comparison and on-going analysis of participant responses, I worked to attain theoretical saturation of the concepts under exploration; throughout this process the questions evolved, with some dropping away and others being expanded upon as new concepts emerged through subsequent interviews.

I also wanted to include an assessment of the personality of participants, in order to better understand the influence of differences in perception on their involvement in the initiation process within their organizations. In order to achieve this goal, a personality assessment tool called Insights Discovery was employed as part of the data collection; the validity of the Insights Discovery model as a tool for personality assessment has been reviewed by the British Psychological Society (2009), and found to have a high overall reliability for the four measures of personality that are evaluated within the tool. The results of the Insights Discovery evaluator are numeric measures against four constructs of personality. The use of this evaluation tool introduced an element of mixed methodology into the study, in particular an "embedded design" of quantitative input into an overall qualitative study, which is one of the approaches described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) as being appropriate for integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques. The personality data was intended to provide a means of exploring the influence of

material differences in personality on how participants approached their roles in the project initiation process.

Reframing The Study

The primary intent of this study was to formulate a theory of personal influences on project initiation decisions, which was initially conceived as gaining understanding into how power, personality and rules come together to shape personal involvement in the project initiation process. In the development of substantive theory, the theory is the project of the research; it is not conceived in advance (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998). In this case, while the original research questions were formulated on the basis of the initial literature review, conducting the interviews and analyzing the results led to insights into the critical influences of individuals on project initiation decisions, and these resulted in a shift in emphasis of the study. The analysis reframed the expectations originally developed from the literature review, and provided additional insights and direction that proved to be important in developing a full understanding of project initiation involvement.

Specifically, the original research questions had been based upon an expectation that emerged from the literature that power, personality and rules would be present in equal measure in the project initiation process. While each of these concepts was present, they were operationalized at very different conceptual levels and with different implications for the results. As well, while the findings did provide insights regarding the roles of participants, broader insights in terms of rules and process also emerged. In particular, the concept of “agency” emerged as a particularly influential concept that was central to the study, rather than being a tangential consideration within the larger exploration of rules.

These insights resulted in a reformulation of the research questions of the study:

Table 1 - Research Questions

#	Question
RQ1	How do individuals perceive the process of project initiation?
RQ2	What influences these perceptions?

#	Question
RQ3	What are the perceived influences on decision making process effectiveness?
RQ4	How do personal and structural influences shape the making of effective project initiation decisions?

Developing Theory

The result of this research is the development of a substantive theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on the effectiveness of project initiation decisions. “Agency” emerged as the core category that served as the basis of developing this theory; the concept of agency is one that was present in each participant description, whether it was actively influencing decision results, being constrained by process, augmenting rules, or proving perceptually unattainable by participants. The exercise of agency augmented the rule systems of the organizations, whether they were based upon explicitly defined process or implicitly understood conventions.

The findings of this study are that agency is influenced by position, decision involvement and personality. Process effectiveness is influenced by process formality, process consistency, decision process clarity and an emphasis on the process aspects of personal influence. Rule effectiveness is influenced by an emphasis on the political aspects of personal influence, and is negatively impacted by the presence of dysfunctional politics in the decision process and when the role of the project shaper is informal. The resulting theory will provide guidance to executives and those involved in supporting the initiation of projects by providing guidelines that will help them to better support effective project decisions.

Contributing To Theory

In addition to the development of a substantive theory of personal involvement in project initiation, this study makes a number of theoretical contributions to the literature. In particular, it makes a significant contribution to understanding the process of making project initiation decisions, and the role of the project shaper in supporting the process. The findings expand upon the concepts advanced by Smith and Winter (2010); the presence of the project shaper role (although it is sometimes informal in nature) is confirmed, and the core categories that Smith and Winter

propose align with those that emerge from this study. This study also contributes an exploration of rules and particularly the influence of agency in enhancing the contributions of previous research. It also provides empirical support for the theory that agency is influenced by personality, a perspective that had previously been hypothesized in conceptual papers or evidenced through the use of trait and attribute questionnaires (de Boer & Zandberg, 2012; Davies et al., 2010; Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Ward, Thorn, Clements, Dixon, & Sanford, 2006). The study also demonstrates the operationalization of agency at mid-management and project levels of organizations; until now agency has typically been explored at executive levels (Gary & Wood, 2011; Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Mooney, 2005; O'Reilly & Main, 2010; Simsek, Heavey, & Veiga, 2010; Wiseman & Gomez-Mejia, 1998) and is increasingly being used to investigate board-level accountabilities (Heracleous & Lan, 2012; Huse, Hoskisson, Zattoni, & Viganò, 2011; Lan & Heracleous, 2010; Vandewaerde, Voordeckers, Lambrechts, & Bammens, 2011). While Martynov (2009) presumed that agent behaviours are inherently self-serving rather than altruistic, there is more recent evidence of agents engaging in stewardship-oriented behaviours (Miller & Sardais, 2011). While Miller and Sardais (2011) limited their discussion of agency as stewardship to board and executive characteristics, this study strongly evidenced that those exhibiting high levels of agency may be present at varying levels of organizational authority, and are predominantly seen to be furthering organizational objectives.

Finally, the study reinforces previous observations of the capacity of agency to augment or compensate for inadequacies of organizational rule systems (Espedal, 2006; Feldman, 2000; Feldman, 2003; Feldman, 2004; Morrison, 2006). It also provides empirical evidence that agency can be constrained by very formal and consistent process, and may not be exercised where actors perceive internal inabilities or external constraints. In that this study is focussed upon the development of substantive theory, however, the primary contribution of this study is to emphasize an enhanced understanding of how agency and rule emphasis combine to support the making of effective project initiation decisions.

Guiding The Thesis

The focus of this study is the process of project initiation, and the role that individual actors play in contributing to the process. It seeks to explore how project

initiation is perceived, and the rule systems and individual approaches that influence the project initiation process. The study adopts a grounded theory approach, developing a substantive-level theory of how agency and rule emphasis influence the effectiveness of project initiation decisions.

The study is presented in eight chapters, as summarized in the following figure. An explanation of each chapter follows below:

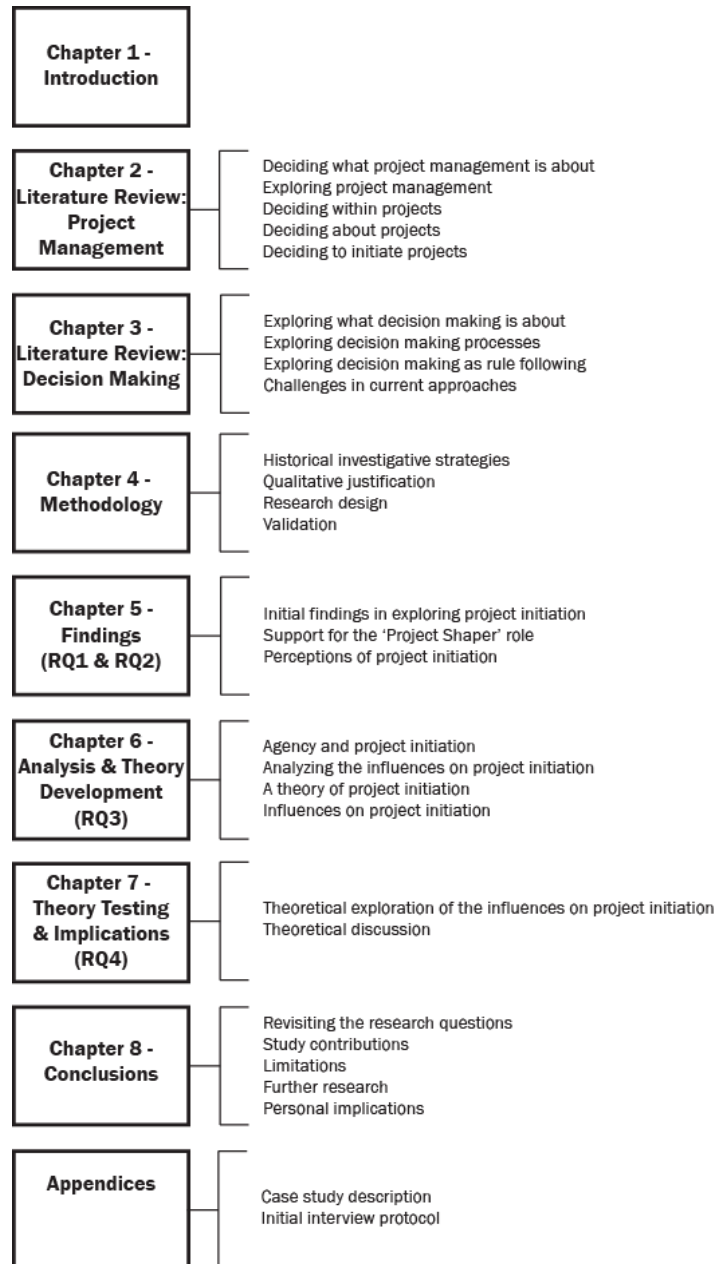


Figure 1. Overview of chapter structure.

Chapter 1 – Introduction. The introduction provides an overview of the purpose and importance of the study. It reviews the key works within the literatures of project management and decision making that supported formulation and evolution of the research questions. It also reviews the methodological approach that has been adopted, provides an overview of the resulting theory and its implications, and provides a guide to the overall structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 – Project Management. This chapter provides a review of the project management literature, particularly as it relates to the understanding of project initiation. The chapter explores the theoretical foundations of project management, and how decision making within and about projects has been previously explored. It also introduces related literatures pertaining to product development and portfolio management, and explores the project initiation considerations and decision making constructs present in each of those domains. Finally, the chapter explores a recent study that identifies the role of "project shaper" as one of guide and champion in the initiation of projects.

Chapter 3 – Decision Making. This chapter provides a review of the decision making literature, and in particular the formulation of strategic management decisions. It examines critiques of traditional rational decision making models, and the development of behavioural models of decision making. The role of decision making as rule following and the presence of decision routines in organizations is explored in detail.

Chapter 4 – Methodology. This chapter provides a review of the methodological strategy and approach adopted in conducting the research. It explores the considerations and challenges that emerged during the course of the literature review, and presents the methodological strategy that was adopted in order to conduct the study. The research procedures are explored in detail, explaining how the data collection and results analysis were conducted – including open, axial and selective coding of the findings. The chapter also provides an overview of how the research was approached to ensure validity of the results, and the ethical considerations adopted in conducting the study.

Chapter 5 – Findings. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the findings resulting from the study. In particular, this chapter answers the study's first two research questions: "How do individuals perceive the process of project initiation?" and "What influences these perceptions?" In particular, the results of open

coding of participant interviews are provided, as well as the categories and sub-categories that were identified as a result of axial coding. These categories are contrasted with a previous, abbreviated study associated with the role of project shaper (Smith & Winter, 2010).

Chapter 6 – Analysis and Theory Development. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the core category of agency that emerged in conducting this study, as well as the related concepts that explain the variations in the data observed in participant interviews. The core category and related concepts are then synthesized to present a substantive theory of how agency and rule emphasis influence the development of effective project initiation decisions.

Chapter 7 – Theory Testing & Implications. This chapter provides a review of the applicability of the theory through the presentation of several scenarios, each of which illustrate the applicability of the theory to a subset of participant descriptions identified within this study. The implications of the study are explored through a review of recent empirical studies of agency and rule systems, both of which emerged from the study as concepts of particular influence.

Chapter 8 – Conclusions. The final chapter presents a review of the research questions and a discussion of theoretical and empirical contributions of the study. The limitations of the current study and identification of opportunities for future research are discussed, as well as personal implications that emerged as I conducted the research and particularly those that resulted from the analysis.

Chapter 2 - Project Management

Introduction

While project management as a field of research has been broadly explored, few studies have investigated how projects are initiated. What limited research does exist suggests a formally managed, rational and rigorous approach of analysis and project selection. While the decision making literature, which is explained in some detail in Chapter 3, does present some corresponding rational and normative arguments, the majority of perspectives suggest that this is not how decisions are actually made, and that words such as “rational” and “normative” do not accurately portray the actions of a decision maker.

The current chapter explores the project management literature, with a particular view to understanding how project initiation decisions are considered. The first section examines the evolution within the literature of project management as a practice, and discusses the foundational principles—as well as the problems—associated with understanding project management. This subject is further expanded with an investigation into the means by which decisions are understood to be made within projects. Next, the decision making that is associated with the project initiation process—broadly suggested to be a critical element in the success of projects—is explored in detail, including current practices and gaps. The final section examines the strategies that need to be addressed, in understanding project initiation and looks at suggested approaches for more effectively investigating project initiation decisions. This chapter culminates in the review of a promising research paper into the project initiation process which offers a possible conceptual model by which the process of initiation—and the role of project shaper—could be explored.

Deciding What Project Management is About

Understanding the initiation of projects requires first exploring and defining the domain of project management. As many researchers have previously pointed out, however: project management has no underlying theoretical foundation (Artto &

Wikström, 2005; Brady & Söderlund, 2008; Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Crawford, Pollack, & England, 2006; Hodgson, 2002; Hodgson & Cicmil, 2008; Maylor, 2001; Smyth & Morris, 2007; Söderlund, 2004a; Söderlund, 2004b; Thomas, 1998; Thomas & Tjaeder, 2000; Williams & Samset, 2010; Winter & Szczepanek, 2008; Winter, Andersen, Elvin, & Levene, 2006); there is no consistent definition of its practices (Engwall, 2003; International Project Management Association, 2006; Maylor, 2001; Morris et al., 2006; Morris, 1989; Packendorff, 1995; Project Management Institute, 2008; Shenhar, Dvir, & Shulman, 1995; Thomas & Mullaly, 2008; Turner & Müller, 2003; Williams, 2004b; Winter et al., 2006); and there is no clear agreement on its definition (Cicmil et al., 2006; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007; International Project Management Association, 2006; Maylor, 2001; Packendorff, 1995; Project Management Institute, 2008; Thomas, 2000; Turner & Müller, 2003; Winter et al., 2006). These constraints create significant challenges not only for understanding what kind of management is in place of which we are discussing the initiation , but also what expectations might normally and reasonably be expected to exist in the “project initiation” process.

Modern notions about the practice of project management have their roots in the engineering functions established within the U.S. military and oil industries in the 1930s. By the mid-1960s, most practitioners were interpreting (and perhaps confusing) the management systems developed for U.S. defense programs as “project management” (Morris, 1994). While some writers have referred to project management as being centuries old, suggesting that it played a role in everything from the construction of the pyramids to putting man on the moon (Meredith & Mantel, 2008), arguments have also been advanced that such interpretations simply give spurious credibility to techniques, models and procedures that have existed in their current incarnations for less than half a century (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). As we will see, this confusion and questionable credibility of project management practices will also have a follow-on influence in terms of how project initiation decisions are perceived by those involved in the initiation process, and how they are ultimately made.

Techniques for planning and control that stem from the operations management and operations research disciplines have historically constituted what are generally

recognized as project management practices (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Kwak & Anbari, 2009; Williams, 2004b), and include a view that most methods and techniques are in fact different ways of finding the optimal sequences of activities and allocating resources to them accordingly (Packendorff, 1995). The decision sciences were also an early, significant source of project management techniques, although their influence has subsequently declined (Kwak & Anbari, 2009). The techniques that were associated with project management in the early days encountered criticism for being too process- and control-focussed, resulting in the subsequent adoption of practices inspired by the fields of organization theory, human resource management and leadership (Morris, 1994; Packendorff, 1995). From their strong engineering and technical base, project management techniques also came to both draw on and be influenced by the fields of innovation, and research and development (Hobday, 1998). The applicability of project management has since continued to proliferate, expanding into such diverse areas as education, health, social services and the arts (Hodgson, 2002). The result is an emerging understanding of the process of project management that is increasingly broad in terms of both influence and approach.

Lack of Consensus About Project Management Theory

While there is extensive agreement on the lack of a theory of project management today, there is considerably less agreement on what to do about it. One perspective is that project management—and management itself—is by its nature multidisciplinary, and draws on a range of social (and natural) sciences for its theoretical underpinnings (Smyth & Morris, 2007). Theory development in project management draws not simply on traditional perspectives and resources, but on an integration of both tangible and intangible contributors (Jugdev, 2004). In the absence of theory, however, a multiplicity of standards establishes a *de facto* expectation of projects as having well defined goals that are managed by drawing upon well codified practices and techniques (Crawford, Morris, Thomas, & Winter, 2006). One criticism of these standards for project management is that they may be based upon myths or beliefs that have little to do with how projects are actually managed in "the real world" (Thomas, 1998). Thomas goes on to suggest that foremost amongst these myths might be that "...the primary function of project management is to get something done on time, on budget, and within

specifications” (1998, p. 2). Critics also charge that prevailing principles reflected in published standards are based more on creating a sense of control than on providing a space for learning and flexibility (Thomas & Tjaeder, 2000). The nature of current standards in codifying defined and prescriptive practices, as well as the questionable relevance of these standards, have also been cited as establishing a significant source of control, rather than the objective neutrality that the standards purport to create (Hodgson, 2002; Thomas, 2000). The implication is that our traditional understanding of project management may not only be incomplete but also insufficient.

There is a broad and growing concern about the lack of relevance of current theories of project management in relating to how projects are managed in different industry sectors around the world (Winter & Szczepanek, 2008). A common criticism is that project management, as currently defined and promoted, emphasizes attempts to control complex worlds, at the expense of other approaches and ways of reasoning (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). In particular, these critics say, there is a need to look beyond the mainstream literature to other disciplines, such as strategic management, operations management and the management of change (Winter et al., 2006) to obtain a more thorough understanding of the factors that influence how projects are actually managed. This perspective includes calls to extend the exploration of project management beyond the bounds of single projects in single organizations, and to address the challenges of managing multi-project and inter-firm issues (Söderlund, 2004b). Both of these viewpoints suggest the need for a broader strategic perspective regarding projects and project management.

Considerations around what an expanded view of project management might entail are varied. Calls for the evolution of project management theory have pointed out the need to focus on how project management is actually practised, by examining the actions and behaviours that result from the political, social and power dynamics that emerge in managing project forms within organizational and social structures (Blomquist, Hällgren, Nilsson, & Söderholm, 2010; Cicmil et al., 2006; Thomas, 2000). This is a relatively pragmatic view of how project management is structured, echoing the exploration of Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* by Flyvbjerg (2001), and focusing on the lived reality of projects, and the development of practical theory and knowledge. The

intent is to broaden and deepen the theoretical basis of project management, "...as befits a mature and confident discipline" (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2008, p. 142). What is unclear as yet is the direction that a more pragmatic view of project management might actually take.

While there is widespread belief that the discipline of project management needs to continue to grow and evolve, there are also those who express the view that we simply need to stop theorizing and get on with the practice of doing something. Despite the call of some to develop, or alternatively to broaden, the theory of project management, there are differing viewpoints that suggest that project management should not strive to become a specialized discipline developing its own "grand theories," but should "...echo the role that project managers take in practice and be the integrators of knowledge and theory from all the other disciplines" (Maylor, 2001, p. 97). The viewpoint expressed by Maylor is supported by Soderlund (2004a), who questions the widespread assumption that a universal theory of project management can be developed, and wonders whether it is even appropriate to consider doing so, given the significant differences that exist amongst and across projects. This perspective is reinforced by Artto & Wikstrom (2005), who suggest that project management draws on several underlying theoretical foundations, including those of organization, innovation, sociology and psychology. According to Winter et al. (2006), given that there are various theoretical approaches, many of which overlap, there is a need to extend the field beyond and connect it more directly to the challenges of contemporary project management practice. "Old ways and old habits must, to some extent, be put aside to allow for... new management ideas" (Brady & Söderlund, 2008, p. 467). The implication is that project management needs to change, and yet there appears to be a fundamental lack of agreement regarding what this change should look like.

Lack of Consensus About Project Management

Just as there is lack of clarity about the underlying theories of project management, so too is there lack of agreement about what the practice of project management actually represents. The definitions of project management contained within the standards developed by professional associations provide limited and imprecise guidance in that matter. The Project Management Institute (PMI), the largest

professional association of project management practitioners in the world, offer the rather encompassing statement that: “Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements” (Project Management Institute, 2008, p. 6). The International Project Management Association (IPMA) offers a no less sweeping and no more precise representation when it says:

...the discipline of Project Management has to have rigorous standards and guidelines to define the work of project management personnel. These requirements are defined by collecting, processing and standardizing the accepted and applied competence in project management. (International Project Management Association, 2006, p. 2)

Apart from being overly broad and less than helpful, such definitions are seen by some to have far greater limitations. In reference to PMI’s Project Management Body of Knowledge, Williams offers the following critique:

Project management as set out in this work is presented as a set of procedures that are self-evidently correct: following these procedures will produce effectively managed projects; project failure is indicative of inadequate attention to the project management procedures. (2004a, p. 2)

Packendorff was also critical, observing that the methods of project management are normative techniques for planning and control, “...developed by the consultants and engineers of industrialism” (1995, p. 320). Pointing out that according to current definitions, project management is rational, normative and essentially positivist in nature, Williams (2004a) suggests that this interpretation results in processes that heavily emphasize planning, impose conventional control models and approach the role of “project manager” in such a fashion that the management of projects is decoupled from its context. Such criticisms imply that current statements about project management are less definitions and more justifications for the continued relevance of standards.

In response to these positivist and normative limitations of current understandings of project management, many authors advocate a more encompassing view of project management as a practice. In part, their perspectives are based upon

the technical and process differences associated with the underlying nature of the projects being managed (Engwall, 2003; Shenhar et al., 1995). They are also founded upon an expanding view of what project management practice represents, and the number of disciplines from which project managers draw in actual practice (Maylor, 2001; Morris et al., 2006). Addressing the breadth of the challenge, a major research network cited

...the sheer complexity of projects and programmes across all sectors and at all levels, encompassing all manner of aspects including the multiplicity of stakeholders, and the different agenda, theories, practices and discourses operating at different levels within different interested groups, in the ever-changing flux of events. (Winter et al., 2006, p. 641)

The broad implication is that traditional definitions of project management are found wanting, and new perspectives based upon actual practice and a realistic assessment of complexity are required.

Lack of Clarity in Project Definitions

If the lack of clarity and agreement regarding the underlying theory and the actual practice of project management were not enough of a challenge to an investigation of project initiation, there is also significant disagreement on what actually constitutes a “project.” The institutional viewpoint, as for project management, is largely positivist, normative and vague. The PMI definition reads: “A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result” (Project Management Institute, 2008, p. 5). The IPMA offers a slightly different view, saying that “A project is a time and cost constrained operation to realize a set of defined deliverables (the scope to fulfill the project’s objectives) up to quality standards and requirements” (International Project Management Association, 2006, p. 13). A third alternative is proposed by Turner and Muller (2003), which offers what Turner termed his “definitive statement on the subject,” that being

An endeavour in which human, material and financial resources are organized in a novel way, to undertake a unique scope of work, of given specification, within constraints of cost and time, so as to achieve beneficial change defined by quantitative and qualitative objectives. (Turner & Müller, 2003, p. 1)

All of the interpretations of a project have encountered significant criticism, both generally and specifically. Each definition speaks to a level of uniqueness and novelty which, while once applicable for large and lengthy engineering projects, is often in practical terms misplaced and which also ignores the reality of projects as business processes (Maylor, 2001). Real projects are viewed as more varied, complex and multi-dimensional than the rational models and definitions imply (Winter et al., 2006). The underlying reality which is conveyed from actual practitioners is that projects are "...complex social settings characterized by tensions between unpredictability, control and collaborative interaction among diverse participants on any project" (Cicmil et al., 2006, p. 676). The inescapable conclusion is that traditional views of "project" appear to ignore the perspectives and experience of participants within the project process.

In response, alternative definitions of "project" have been proposed. These have included pragmatic inferences, such as: "...the crucial attribute [of a project] is that it is important enough in the eyes of senior management to justify setting up a serial organizational unit outside the routine structure of the organization" (Meredith & Mantel, 2008, p. 9). Projects have also been redefined as temporary organizations, typically referencing projects as, "...a versatile, flexible, and predictable form of work organization" (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006, p. 113). These perspectives reframe the view of projects as being simply abstract and mechanistic structures to being seen as flexible, responsive organizations that deliver something that someone cares about.

Notably problematic in investigating the decision making process surrounding the initiation of projects is the ability to clearly articulate where the boundaries of the project actually lie. In particular, the fact that the majority of definitions involve some degree of delivery to an objective, goal or outcome implies as a self-evident assertion that the project has already been defined, either technically or commercially (Morris, 1989). This suggests that additional work surrounds the conceptualization of the project which, by inference, is about the project but is not considered a part of the project (Williams & Samset, 2010). The inherent challenge in investigating the initiation of projects is that such investigation asks in essence how we bring into being an entirely artificial construct. The study of project management has reified a concept into a concrete and specific thing. The standard view of projects is reliant upon a perception that they are

real and tangible, and the standardization of project management practices depends upon a presumption that they are universal and consistent (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). The rhetoric, decision processes and actions that involve projects are neither sequential nor mutually coherent, raising the question, 'Why projects?' (Packendorff, 1995). Given the recognition that projects are a social construction, an alternative question is posed by Hodgson and Cicmil (2007, p. 432): "Rather than asking 'What is a project?', we would pose the question in these terms: 'What do we do when we call something 'a project?'" This discussion would suggest that deciding "what do we do" is as important as defining "project."

This section has introduced the concept of project management, highlighting the lack of theoretical foundation, definition of practices, or agreement on what constitutes a project. These dilemmas have led to varying calls for the expansion of theoretical perspectives, the reformulation of project management practices and the reconceptualization of what projects represent. Reconsidering the foundations of what projects are and how they are managed also calls into question how projects are initiated, and the core considerations that go into their evaluation. In particular, there is a need to clarify the boundaries of projects, to determine where initiation choices are made, and to identify the criteria that go into making those choices. This also raises important questions about how project management itself is understood, and necessitates identification of the perspectives by which answers to these questions might be framed. The next section identifies and elaborates on those perspectives in the literature that attempt to offer insight into how project management and our understanding of projects might be reframed.

Exploring Project Management

Understanding how we decide what projects to undertake requires clarification of what we choose to call "projects," and why we choose to manage them the way we do, as suggested by Packendorff (1995). Understanding what actually constitutes a project, however, raises the question posed by Hodgson and Cicmil (2007) as to what we actually do when we choose to call something a project. The actual choice to call something "a project," which presumes finite boundaries of start and finish, also suggests actions and activities that occur not just during, but also before (and very likely

after) the event so named, as implied by Williams & Samset (2010). This is in turn shaped by the perspective from which project management is viewed.

To understand this landscape holistically, it is important to explore how project management has been defined in the literature to date, the practices that have been professed (or put down) and the questions that have been raised (or responded to). This section explores the evolution of project management as a practice through the discussion of three overall perspectives or frames:

- Managing as control, in which projects are primarily seen as a vehicle for planning, decomposition and control;
- Managing as organizing, in which projects are primarily seen as temporary organizations; and
- Managing as practice, in which projects are primarily seen as social constructs in which actions, politics and power delineate how work occurs and results are produced.

Managing as Control

A broad range of research cites current definitions of project management practice as being predominantly normative and rational (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Crawford, Morris et al., 2006; Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007; Morris, 1994; Packendorff, 1995; Partington, Pellegrinelli, & Young, 2005; Smyth & Morris, 2007; Söderlund, 2004a; Thomas, 1998; van Marrewijk et al., 2008). This in part stems from the fact that the development of the discipline of project management until the 1960s was based almost exclusively on quantitative techniques within the domain of operations research (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). Project management as a rational and normative discipline owes much to the industrialization of work practices; “If machines are more efficient than humans, then humans should work like machines” (Packendorff, 1995, p. 319). The rising use of computers in every day life has since resulted in a “second generation” of operations-research-based approaches, centralized around the use of applications and expert systems for project planning and control (Packendorff, 1995). For some, this has certainly resulted in a sustainment, if not a resurgence, of rational and normative perspectives of project management.

Much of the evolution of project management as a normative and rational set of capabilities is rooted in the definition of project success. Traditional views of project management success focus on conformance to budget, scope and time constraints (Maylor, 2001). This is reinforced when we view project management through the lens of project planning, and view the effort associated with project planning as being critical to project success (Dvir, Raz, & Shenhar, 2003). The core underlying perception in much of the literature is that conformance to project management dictates is more important than the actual value being created or contributed by any individual project (Winter et al., 2006). There is an alternative view, however, that project managers should act more strategically, and that their activities should be focussed upon the needs of the organization and the delivery of competitive advantage (Shenhar, Dvir, Levy, & Maltz, 2001). This approach suggests that project management should include considerations of delivering excellence, continuous improvement and the attainment of customer delight (Maylor, 2001). Evaluating project management also requires an exploration of the role that ambiguity plays in failing to deliver on project success (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). Reinterpreting perspectives of success—as well as determining when success has not been realized—begins to suggest an alternative view of what projects must deliver, and what project management as a practice must emphasize.

A significant redefinition of project success is centred around the delivery by projects of business value. There is a visibly increased focus on value creation, rather than production creation, as the primary purpose of project management (Winter et al., 2006). This means extending the definition of success beyond delivering product functionality to attaining business performance, customer satisfaction and project portfolio benefits (Steffens, Martinsuo, & Artto, 2007). This shift in thinking represents a significant reframing of project focus from product-centric to value-centric; in particular, it suggests that the emphasis of value creation should not be on the recipients of the project results, but is instead should be judged in terms of the value created for *their* customers (Cooper et al., 2000). The result is a very different dynamic in which projects are viewed as "value-creating systems," rather than adhering to the traditional engineering view of being "temporary production systems" (Winter et al., 2006). If we are to reinterpret the assessment of value, and the means by which value must be

delivered, then the choice of projects and the management practices utilized within projects must also be reconsidered.

Even in the face of broad support and advocacy for a rational and normative world-view of project management practices, however, there is a growing recognition that the related tools, methods and procedures are not being used as they are defined, or at least that they are not being used as designed or intended (Packendorff, 1995). Practitioners themselves are now coming to question the degree to which mainstream tools, training and software have ever reflected the actuality of managing projects (Crawford, Morris et al., 2006). A significant presumption embedded in most definitions of project management is that projects are like machines and that there is one unambiguous and absolutely best way to perform any given task (Thomas & Tjaeder, 2000): In such scenarios, project management is presumed to be a control orientation based upon the need to think before acting, plan before doing and unquestioningly follow processes. In this context, the failings of project management are to be expected as one of the consequences of its being an emerging field; over time, it is presumed that techniques will be further honed and systems will be perfected, and the field will settle upon a set of reliable and essentially effective models. As a result, management skills and knowledge become value-neutral competencies that can be conceptualized by establishing terminology and meaning, overlooking the social, political and power dynamics at play in organizations (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). The inherent challenge with this viewpoint is that the realities of project management are not reflected within normative assumptions of practice—and, in fact, that such assumptions are increasingly being found wanting as effective structures to support project delivery.

Once normative practice is called into question, however, it becomes clear that there is a need for a more appropriate conceptual framework by which actual project management can be understood. Attempts to systematize applied practice are typically based upon an underlying presumption that there are identifiable patterns and generalizations from which rules and guidelines and best practice can be drawn (Smyth & Morris, 2007). While historically, issues of failure have been assumed away through generic models, the need to move past universal success measures of schedule, cost and scope requires understanding project management through the eyes of those who

live it (Thomas, 1998). Models today, however, are often developed intuitively: there is little actual empirical evidence to support their relevance, and they give no consideration to applicability or context (Smyth & Morris, 2007). Within these models, there is no room to accommodate the varieties of ambiguity, and power relationships, or the complexity of decision making challenges, that are faced by project managers who are limited by bounded rationality (van Marrewijk et al., 2008). These oversights create significant challenges for project managers, and have dangerous implications for the autonomy, creativity and discretion required to deliver projects successfully (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). The result of these discussions are a call for “...new theories of practice – new images, concepts, frameworks and approaches – to help practitioners deal with this complexity in the midst of practice” (Winter et al., 2006, p. 642). One reframing that has been seen by some to be more appropriate and relevant to project management—as it is actually experienced—is the shift from seeing management projects as reified concepts to viewing project management as a means of organizing.

Managing as Organizing

One perspective that is thought to offer more useful theoretical insights into the means by which project management is actually practised is the conceptualization of projects as temporary organizations. Initially proposed by what became referred to as the “Scandinavian School,” this theoretical perspective was grounded in an understanding of contextual factors of projects, a shift in focus to the management of multiple projects, and an appreciation for the project as a temporary organizational structure (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). This represented a shift away from thinking of “project” as a reified “thing” toward a focus on action, where what was recognized as “project” was a set of temporary organizing processes that involved the deliberate social interactions of a group of people in accomplishing a specific, subjectively determined task in which people were removed from their normal routines (Packendorff, 1995). The unique and important understanding that this concept contributes to the theory of “project management” involves its view of the configuration of people operating differently from their usual work patterns in a unique mode and structure, rather than focusing on the tangible outcome of the project that the organization has been established to produce.

The conceptual notion of “projects as organization” was further elaborated by subsequent researchers, who identified the essential concepts and considerations under study within an organizational project framework: these included task, time and team as applied in a sequential series of overlapping stages or modes of work that began with entrepreneurial shaping of ideas, fragmentary commitment building, planning isolation and institutionalized termination (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Rather than focusing on structure, “organizing” theories consider it essential to focus on the actions of individuals and their resulting processes and behaviours (Thomas, 1998). An organizational view also opened up other lines of enquiry, including examination of the internal and external forces that influence organizations, the relationships between the temporary project organization and permanent operational organizations, and views of projects as contextually embedded systems unbounded by time as well as “space” (Maylor, 2001). This expansion of project management study also allowed exploration of why projects exist, why they differ, how they behave, the functions they perform, the value they add and what determines their success and failure (Söderlund, 2004a). An organizational view of project management recognizes that temporary projects and their social contexts are brought about by social interactions and practices, in which actors apply (and develop) normalized rules for their behaviours and actions (Manning, 2008). The capabilities contained within a project’s organization become the aggregate of the capabilities of the various actors within the organization; each actor possesses partly unique capabilities which combine to determine the collective capabilities of the organization (Ruuska, Artto, Aaltonen, & Lehtonen, 2009). The view of project as a product of organizing is a very different view than that of project as a normative and rational structure; it also fundamentally redefines the mechanism by which a project is initiated, and the processes that are considered to be important within this process.

While this organizational focus admittedly brought new and valuable perspectives to the understanding of project management, some still felt that it did not go far enough and failed to proceed to its logical conclusions (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). While welcoming sociological perspectives to the field—in fact, terming them overdue—Cicmil and Hodgson (2006) argued that “...the more conservative current work in this tradition remains strongly wedded to a functionalist view-point, focusing upon improving project

performance through attention to social (i.e., human) factors” (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006, p. 117). While it is still viewed as necessary and appropriate to consciously address the human impacts of organizing as part of the study of project management, a critical view suggests there are broader viewpoints and perspectives that have not yet been addressed.

Managing as Practice

In response to the failure of traditional approaches to provide meaningful and relevant understanding of project management as actually practised, there has emerged a stream of research that is typically grouped under the label of “critical management studies.” In addressing the limitations—and perceived dangers—of traditional positivist approaches, critical perspectives introduce the relationships between individuals and collectives and explore the power, social and political structures that underlie and influence organizing and actions (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). The rise of a critical approach was viewed as being particularly warranted given the evident failures of normative practices of project management to successfully deliver projects (Williams, 2004a; Williams, 2005). In particular, normative practices were demonstrated to be not just inappropriate, but counterproductive, to the management of projects that featured significant dimensions of complexity and uncertainty (Cooper, 2006; Williams, 2004a; Williams, 2005). The “black box” of normative project management emphasized blind faith in universal practices over an embodied and reflexive rationality that was centred upon the actors who work within and manage projects (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). Critical perspectives appear to provide an important alternative viewpoint that places understandings of power, politics and influence at centre stage, creating a very different perspective by which to understand project management.

An early driver in the growth of critical management studies was the need to address and provide guidance on dealing with complexity in projects. In the face of uncertainty about goals, methods and structure, classical project management techniques have been found to be both unsuitable and inappropriate (Williams, 1999). Adjusting and adapting traditional methods to manage in the face of uncertainty requires a study of individual conceptions of reality, not a search for universal truths (Thomas, 1998). Rather than emphasizing processes and models, there was a growing

recognition in the literature that it is people who deliver successful projects, and that it is the ability of people to intelligently engage with the complexity of projects that enables them to be successful (Winter et al., 2006). Despite numerous efforts to define complexity—and comparatively fewer efforts to actually address it—the results have so far been unsatisfying, and we continue to see calls for responses to managing complexity that can actually provide meaningful guidance to project managers (Geraldini et al., 2011). Addressing the experience of project managers therefore means embracing the levels of complexity and uncertainty that are encountered in their endeavours to manage project efforts.

Providing practical guidance required a refocussing of attention from universal truths and all-encompassing theories to an understanding of practical application, and more importantly to the development of practical wisdom and knowledge. This understanding, labelled by Flyvbjerg (2001) as Aristotle's concept of "phronesis," viewed the manager as a "virtuoso social and political actor" who was able to draw on ethics, values, judgement, intuition and reflexive thinking to develop appropriate strategies of acting (Cicmil et al., 2006). The distinction revolved around the development of "know how" and "know why", rather than simply "know what" (Crawford, Morris et al., 2006). It was suggested that the first and most important consequence of such a focus would be "...an increased sensitivity to the possibility of oppression and exploitation in project settings, an outcome which is especially likely given the pressurized environment of most projects, regardless of sector and scale" (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006, p. 119). This begins to place the manager centre stage as a focal point in how projects are managed, rather than simply as a bystander to the larger concept of "project."

Numerous critical research studies in the domain of project management have included explorations regarding professionalization (Hodgson, 2002); practitioner development (Crawford, Morris et al., 2006; Walker, Anbari et al., 2008; Walker, Cicmil et al., 2008); the gendered implications of project management work (Buckle & Thomas, 2003; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006; Thomas & Buckle-Henning, 2007); the process of project management research (Winter, Smith, Cooke-Davies, & Cicmil, 2006; Winter et al., 2006); the role of standards in project management (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007); governance frameworks (Williams et al., 2010); structures of project management in

organizations (Aubry, 2011); personal development and career experience of project managers (Hodgson, Paton, & Cicmil, 2011) and the bureaucratization of project work (Thomas, 2006). In general, the lived experience of project managers of working in a project environment and addressing the challenges of managing projects are becoming an increasingly important focal point in developing an overall understanding of project management.

Conclusions About Exploring Project Management

As has been discussed above, the control orientation that has dominated so much of the rational and normative literature provides little consideration of the strategic purpose of a project, and even less discussion of the considerations that lead to the formulation of project goals. Projects are brought into being with clearly defined commercial and technical goals, and are expected to mechanistically progress forward in delivering their final tangible results. While the idea of projects as organizations introduces both organizational and social dimensions to the practices of project management, much of this literature focusses more specifically on forms of organizing than on the formation and initiation of projects—which are still, to a certain extent, assumed. Critical research studies, by contrast, appear to offer some insight into the influences that shape project initiation decisions, through their exploration of the social, political and power dynamics that influence organizational practices. This would suggest that more interpretivist or constructivist perspectives will likely provide more appropriate frames than rational and normative approaches in investigating project initiation decisions.

Deciding Within Projects

As has been illustrated thus far, there are complex, evolving and diverse viewpoints of project management. These viewpoints encompass different perspectives on how project management is practised, the basis of its success and even what we are choosing to enact—or study—when we call something a project. The choice to initiate or enact a project is something that has only been tangentially referred to thus far in our exploration of the project management literature: there has been recognition that in many project management decisions, some definition of the commercial and technical purpose of the project is self-evident (Morris, 1989); there has also been some

exploration of the initiation process as the dimensions of project governance were investigated (Williams et al., 2010). However, a more involved examination of decision making in a project context is now required.

This section explores in further detail how decisions are made in projects, and more specifically how decisions are made about projects. In addition, it begins to elaborate how a larger investigation of project initiation decisions might be conceived and conducted. It draws on research that has been conducted on decision making within the project management literature, and highlights the challenges and limitations that have been encountered.

The Opportunity to Explore Decision Making

Decisions are an inherent and essential aspect of the project management process. The exploration of project decisions within the literature has been cited by some as largely limited to those that can be classified as “stage-gate” or “between-phase” decisions; Steffens et al. (2007) suggest the importance of between-gate, continuous-change decision schemes that enable projects to respond to changing business environments. They also recognize that some of the decisions associated with projects are inherently political; they found that the more strategic the decisions, the more likely they were to by-pass any formal change-management system. Results in this area were also influenced by the maturity and context of the organization, which suggested “...the maturity of the surrounding business as a relevant contextual factor which was related to the thoroughness of the change management system...and also the decision-making approach” (Steffens et al., 2007, p. 711). The implication is that decision making is broader than viewed by some, and—like project management overall—is not simply a rational process but is one that is subject to influences of politics and personal influence.

Decision making has also been demonstrated to be subject to the personal and cognitive viewpoints of those faced with choices and challenges, with more recent research acknowledging the presence of optimism biases during the execution stages of projects (Kutsch, Maylor, Weyer, & Lupson, 2011). The consequences of decision results can be significant and broadly felt, up to and including impacts on the long-term strategic goals of the organization, particularly with respect to mega-projects (Eweje,

Turner, & Müller, 2012; Flyvbjerg & Budzier, 2011; Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003). This is also true within business change projects that have as their focus the strategic change of the organization (Winter et al., 2006). Decisions also have a double-edged aspect, in that they directly influence how the team responds but also shape how senior managers perceive challenges (Eweje et al., 2012). Despite a broad and growing recognition of political, social and power dynamics in decision making, however, many more positivist examples continue to emerge, focussing on the introduction of more refined, precise and rational decision making systems and models (see, for example, Fang & Marle, 2012; Fortune, White, Jugdev, & Walker, 2011; Marques, Gourc, & Lauras, 2011). The continued emphasis on rational approaches that attempt to deny the influence of politics and human nature represents an on-going challenge in more comprehensively exploring how project decisions are made.

The Challenges Associated with Decision Making

From the broader literature, it appears that decision making is widely considered to be a fruitful area of study to increase understanding of how projects are managed (see, for example, Andersen et al., 2009; Brady & Maylor, 2010; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil & Marshall, 2005; Drummond, 1996; Geraldi et al., 2011; McCray et al., 2002; Miranda & Hillman, 1996; Muller et al., 2009; Perminova et al., 2008; Schofield & Wilson, 1995; Shenhar et al., 2002; Smith & Winter, 2010; Thomas et al., 2002; Thomas & Buckle-Henning, 2007; Tiwana et al., 2007; van Marrewijk et al., 2008; Williams & Samset, 2010). The number of challenges and barriers to decision making raised in the literature indicate that meaningful guidance on improving decision effectiveness would be both valued and valuable.

Political behaviours and actions are acknowledged to exert a significant influence on decision making. Projects frequently have to be justified in the context of the organization's previously stated strategic directions (Schofield & Wilson, 1995). It is suggested that there are deep forces which influence decision makers, and which most often present themselves in times of crisis (Drummond, 1996). Factors of politics and inertia are unlikely to result in influences on or changes to established decision making processes (Miranda & Hillman, 1996). Executives not only seek to make sound decisions, but also to position themselves favourably within the organization, frequently

leading to risk-averse behaviours (Thomas et al., 2002). At the same time, trust is identified as an important influence in organizations for creating greater certainty within organizational and project decision processes (Smyth, Gustafsson, & Ganskau, 2010). Dimensions of distance (including physical, temporal and cultural interpretations of the concept of distance) have also been identified as a factor in decision making, with diversity of actors and differences in modes of operation creating challenges in establishing mutual means of deciding and governance (Ruuska et al., 2009). The consequence is that there are a number of processes that would benefit from being explored in further detail.

In addition to the organizational forces that create decision making challenges, internal factors within actors also influence the decision making process. These include questions of sufficient knowledge and expertise, with past project failures often attributed to lack of project management, technical or subject matter expertise (Artto & Wikström, 2005; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). Contrasting the availability of knowledge is the uncertainty that many actors face in a project setting: where project managers must consider and balance multiple competing views of the future of the project (Williams & Samset, 2010); where reflective learning and sensemaking have been indicated as influencing flexibility and rapidity of decision making (Perminova et al., 2008); and where decision makers are challenged with the need to assess current and potential future states of the project, the interactions that are possible, and the potential consequences of those interactions (Geraldi et al., 2011). The result is a decision making environment in which individual actors must face organizational complexity as well as managing their own personal limitations.

Appreciation for the need of project managers to balance their desire for knowledge and perfect information with the very real uncertainties and complexities they face within a project environment has led to the concept of "bounded rationality" in complex decision making scenarios. A concept originally advanced by Simon (1997), it has led to a large stream of literature that argues that managers exercise bounded rationality rather than being perfectly rational (Tiwana et al., 2007). Essentially, people make decisions that are "...constrained by limited searches, imperfect knowledge and finite time. Decisions are made when solutions, problems, participants and choices flow

around and coincide at a certain point” (van Marrewijk et al., 2008, p. 592). In recognizing that we cannot be perfectly rational, and that both complex uncertainties and inherent biases influence choice, we discover the “...dynamic-complexity aspect of the whole ‘wicked mess’” (Williams & Samset, 2010, p. 42). Confronting the mess requires acceptance of the limitations, as well as attempts to identify strategies that can help appropriately manage their impact.

Even if we should be able to confront the challenges of making decisions, however, we must also confront failures of action. Even in the face of stated desires to attain uniform agreement and commitment on project decisions, there is evidence of continued renegotiation, reconstruction and reinterpretation of performance criteria in project environments (Cicmil & Marshall, 2005). Project environments, which are recognized as being broadly uncertain, are themselves also resistant to changes in practice; even when changes are forced by crises, such responses are often only temporary and are quickly followed by a return to the old ways of working and the development of new defensive routines to confront and block change (Brady & Maylor, 2010). The implication is that even in the face of better strategies for making decisions, actors may tend to revert to familiar if limited approaches, further compounding the issues of process and choice that have already been discussed.

Conclusions About Decision Making Within Projects

Given the aforementioned failures of process, failures of choice and failures of action that can emerge in making decisions in a project context, there is much to be investigated in regard to identifying ways to improve decision making. It is suggested that this in part requires an exploration of relationships; that in those moments where projects seem most out of control and where all hope for rational decision making is lost, the quality of interactions and nurturing of relationships with others is what matters most (Cicmil, 2006). To the extent that this viewpoint is valid, there is a need to understand and explore the power dynamics that are operative in a project context “...by focussing on who is included in, and who is excluded from, the decision-making process” (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006, p. 115). In so doing, the decision making context expands from a single actor to an understanding of relationships among actors, adding further complexity to an environment that is already challenging.

While decision making within projects has been identified as an arduous undertaking for many reasons, one particular challenge that has been insufficiently discussed is how decisions are made about projects. Research in the past has often attempted to explore the dynamics of decisions in projects, while still accepting the boundaries of the project itself (see, for example, Cicmil & Marshall, 2005). What is also required is some consideration regarding what we choose to call “projects,” how we initiate and cancel them, and at what stage in the process we choose to consider them initiated (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007; Morris, 1989; Williams et al., 2010). There have been arguments for the need for a shift in focus and approach in strategy and decision making (Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, & Rura-Polley, 2003), and the need to explore the context of the individual decision maker has been acknowledged—while at the same time the limitations of doing so in an experimental context have been recognized (Keil, 1995; Keil, Mixon, Saarinen, & Tuunainen, 1994). For all of the complexity associated with decision making within projects, choosing which projects to conduct would appear to be that much more challenging.

Deciding About Projects

As has been noted, there has been insufficient discussion of how decisions are made about projects—rather than within them—and in particular how projects are initiated. Much of what does exist in the literature is theoretical and normative—identifying what should be done, while often lamenting the failure to observe these principles in actual practice. That is not to say, however, that there is no literature associated with decisions about projects; particular insights may be gained from exploring domains that are related to project management.

The following section draws on aspects of project management that are related to projects, and therefore offer some tangential insights into the decision making process about them. The section begins with a discussion of the fields of portfolio management and project escalation of commitment. Also explored is the linkage of projects with organizational strategy. This is followed by a discussion of the need to expand the project management role—both in breadth and in depth—to encompass a broader sense of decision making responsibility. The section finishes with a discussion of governance as it is addressed within the project management literature, and looks at

literature regarding cost escalation and benefits escalation to gain specific insights into governance decision making.

Deciding to Take On “Portfolios” of Projects

Portfolio management as a concept attempts to view choices about projects through the lens of investment decisions. Many early references reinforced a rational and objective process of analyzing (and rationalizing) uncertainty; they presumed that uncertainties could be quantified with a fair degree of specificity, and that it was often necessary to only take into account major sources of uncertainty to arrive at appropriate decisions (Afriat, 1971; Cohen & Elton, 1967; Cord, 1964; Herzberger, 1973; Horne, 1966; Stigler, 1961; Wilson, 1969). At the same time, however, it was recognized that consensus and co-ordination failures frequently occurred in investment decisions, and that personnel from marketing, manufacturing, engineering and R&D could seldom agree on the criteria or standards to be employed in evaluating proposals; this resulted in a very early effort to support “...evoking shared values and organizational consensus...” (Souder, 1975, p. 679). The portfolio management literature also saw early recognition of the influence of power and politics, and showed that while objective criteria may dominate the decision making process, they do not explain the decision making process; that goals and criteria are ill-defined, resource allocations result from bargaining and compromise and influence of politics and sub-groups substantially influence decision outcomes (Daft, 1978b). The portfolio management literature also raised the question how to determine the group of actors who influence the initiation process, with the recognition of “dual cores”—technical and administrative—influencing the process in different degrees depending upon different contexts (Daft, 1978a). The portfolio management literature thus wrestled with many of the same challenges regarding initiation decisions as those associated with individual projects; later contributions to that literature, discussed next, endeavoured to provide structures that would comprehensively address these issues.

The discussion of portfolio management was initially a product of the innovation literature, and the work was pioneered in particular by Robert G. Cooper (Cooper, 2000; Cooper, 2006; Cooper & Edgett, 2012; Cooper, Edgett, & Kleinschmidt, 1997a; Cooper, Edgett, & Kleinschmidt, 1997b; Cooper, Edgett, & Kleinschmidt, 1998; Cooper et al.,

2000; Cooper, Edgett, & Kleinschmidt, 2002a; Cooper, Edgett, & Kleinschmidt, 2002b). Portfolio management was primarily focussed on establishing appropriate resource allocations of the firm, and especially on determining what new-product processes would be funded based upon the many potential opportunities; given a situation characterized by uncertainty (of information, opportunities, goals, interdependencies, and decision makers), what was proposed was a mechanistic process of identifying, evaluating and prioritizing project opportunities (Cooper et al., 1997b). Portfolio management was also viewed as the means by which mission, vision and strategy were operationalized, and where two fundamental priorities were considered: whether projects were consistent with organizational strategies, and whether spending breakdowns reflected strategic processes (Cooper et al., 1997a). While inherently rational and positivist in approach, later research demonstrated that none of the portfolio methods was adopted by a majority of organizations, and that the most appropriate solution was often a hybrid of multiple techniques; it was also suggested that "...one might wish to de-emphasize the use of financial methods as the single or dominant approach" (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 33). In other words, even though portfolio management frequently adopted an investment viewpoint, not all portfolio decisions were best expressed in financial terms.

While serious concerns were raised by practitioners about portfolio-management techniques, many of the recommendations were entirely normative in nature; stage-gate approaches were implemented with the presumption that by doing so the quality of information would improve—i.e., that gates should kill poor projects and that senior management would be engaged in the "right way" (Cooper et al., 2000). The emphasis of portfolio management approaches continued to reinforce normative and best practices (Cooper et al., 2002a), and they centred on the facts that: most organizations had too many projects and too few resources to deliver successfully; there needed to be strategic alignment and improved senior management involvement; and there was a need for clear and objective criteria for project selection, review and cancellation (Cooper et al., 2002b). Later writings by Cooper on portfolio management have suggested that while portfolio management was inherently rational and normative in its prescriptions, the reality experienced by practitioners was somewhat different: in about

half the organizations studied, gate meetings did not produce decisions, and were used instead as information and update sessions; there was a lack of high quality and objective decision making; and actual support for the decisions made was inconsistent and infrequent (Cooper & Edgett, 2012). The implication is that portfolio management as practiced was failing to resolve many of the challenges it had been designed to address.

Despite the aforementioned challenges encountered within the domain of portfolio management in adopting and implementing the normative and prescriptive approaches described, the corresponding literature indicates that portfolio management has also been largely rational and positivist in nature. Studies have suggested the adoption of positivist and rational approaches in evaluating the degree to which projects support organizational strategy, going so far as to propose the adoption of policies from other successful international projects and the R&D policies of competitors (Gunasekaran, 1998). Muller et al (2008) assert that successful organizations have: an organization-level practice of selecting and prioritizing projects in line with strategy; shared reporting approaches to channel information from the project to portfolio level; shared responsibility for decisions; and systems that are predominantly characterized as control mechanisms for selection and reporting. In recommending a mechanism for strategic decision making, Doloi & Jaafari (2002) propose the employment of rational strategies and simulation modeling. It is clear that the lessons of the most recent portfolio management research have not yet been incorporated into the project management literature.

While much of the literature around portfolio management is rational, objective and normative, there are some acknowledgements of inherent political influences on decision making. Indeed, portfolio management is identified by some researchers as being fraught with political processes, characterized by constant competition between different managers, with initiation decisions being the result of a long and involved process of generating and ensuring support (Elonen & Artto, 2003). The highly political nature of multi-projects settings are described as a source of constant competition between managers and projects in regard to priorities, personnel, attention and resources (Engwall & Jerbrant, 2003). Where perspectives of portfolio management do

extend beyond a rationalist worldview, they are mired in challenges of politics, position and competition; the challenges of portfolios would therefore appear to be similar to the challenges of initiating individual projects.

Deciding To Escalate Commitment

Another important stream of the literature regarding decisions *about* projects (rather than *within* projects) concerns the escalation of commitment. While escalation focusses more on how to stop projects rather than start them, managing escalation would appear to share many of the same challenges as managing initiation:

Much of organizational theory can be reduced to two fundamental questions: how do we get organizations moving, and how do we get them stopped once they are moving in a particular direction? (Ross & Staw, 1993, p. 701)

The primary focus of much writing on escalation has emphasized understanding the “...apparently irrational instances of escalation where actors persist in courses of action that they could (or should) have known were destined to fail” (Tiwana, Keil, & Fichman, 2006, p. 358). “Advocacy” is fundamental to successfully arriving at decisions to terminate; and advocacy is viewed as having rational and non-rational components, and as being largely influenced by political processes—processes that are not currently seen to be well understood (Green, Welsh, & Dehler, 2003). This suggests that many of the same forces of politics and competition associated with project initiation and portfolio management are also operative in the escalation literature.

Many irrational (or non-rational) factors are seen to influence escalation commitments. Already recognized as largely responsive to politics and power, managers are more likely to ascribe more weight to actions that create an opportunity to positively influence project status, and will even continue doing so in the face of declining performance to save face organizationally (Tiwana et al., 2006). There is also a greater likelihood of escalation of commitment for more innovative opportunities, and the perceived chances of success are seen as higher for new innovations over incremental ones; individuals that remain committed and ultimately succeed in the face of negative feedback are also perceived as better leaders, further influencing social, political and power considerations regarding project decisions (Schmidt & Calantone, 1998). Social networks also have a strong influence on escalation decisions; more

positive feedback has been found to encourage persistence with underperforming projects, and the effect grows even stronger as network size, density and communication frequency increase (Patzelt, Lechner, & Klaukien, 2011). While these influences are presented in the context of escalation, they could be considered to have as much influence in choosing to initiate projects as they do in attempting to stop them.

While there is a great deal of literature regarding escalation decisions, and an appreciation that in part the influences on such decisions are non-rational and a product of social, political and power dynamics, there is still a need identified within the literature for more explanation of underlying motives for escalation decisions. The escalation literature has posed several theories, including self-justification theory, prospect theory and agency theory, as well as introducing social and political factors such as the treatment of sunk costs and the very real enterprise of empire building (Keil, 1995; Keil et al., 1994; Tiwana et al., 2007). This line of thinking is reinforced by similar theoretical discussions in the project management literature (see, for example, Kutsch et al., 2011; Muller et al., 2009). The escalation literature also considers the mechanisms of successfully deescalating commitment to a failing course of action; central to these actions are suggestions that bad news must be communicated from those in a position to observe it to those who are in a position to do something about it, and that those in a position to take action must be both willing to listen and willing to act (Keil & Robey, 1999). The early discussion of Brady and Maylor (2010) suggests that this may be easier to state than it is to actually enact. While the escalation literature provides greater context for the influence of power and politics on project decisions, there is also a strong suggestion that effective strategies for addressing these influences are elusive.

Deciding To Link Projects and Strategy

An emergent theme in the project management literature that connects the initiation of specific projects with the larger purpose of the organization is the assertion that project strategy is a vehicle for delivering organizational strategy. The link between strategy and projects is often described as necessary to ensure that organizations are doing the right projects in the right way (Artto & Wikström, 2005; Aubry et al., 2012; Cooper et al., 2000; Crawford, Hobbs, & Turner, 2006). In part, this linkage with strategy responds to a recognition in the literature that for projects to proceed, they should in

some way be responsive to the objectives and goals of the organization for which they are being done; Morris & Jamieson (2005) assert that while the integration of projects and strategy is insufficiently described in the project management literature, it is worthy of more recognition and study. If projects are done for a purpose, then the linkage between the project and the organization's strategy must be more broadly understood (Morris et al., 2006). This notion is also supported by the fact that the study of project failure shows that they are more often related to strategic failures than technical ones, and are therefore likely the product of political processes within the organization (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). The initial strategic conception of a project represents possibly the most critical decision, and is likely to have the greatest impact on project success or failure (Williams & Samset, 2010). This assertion also recognizes the role of the project as a vehicle for creating strategic value, which therefore means that a project needs to be initiated with an appreciation for the context in which it will be implemented (Winter & Szczepanek, 2008). Linking projects with strategy not only connects projects with a sense of organizational purpose, but also firmly grounds project initiation within the political environment of the organization.

The need to better align projects with organizational goals also suggests the need to look beyond the horizon of the single, lonely project to focus on the simultaneous management of multiple projects. This concept has also been examined in the literature from a number of perspectives. The definition of "program" (sometimes spelled "programme") management includes the co-ordination and direction of multiple integrated projects which collectively contribute to the realization of overall corporate strategy (Partington et al., 2005). A recent "project business" bibliometric study that sought to understand the essential characteristics of how projects serve as vehicles for business suggested that the rationales included: accelerating new product development; organizing for R&D; and supporting the management of multiple projects (Artto & Wikström, 2005). Maylor et al. (2006) also touch on the issue of integrated multiple projects when they state that organizations have an interest in moving beyond the domain of single projects, and that there is a need to understand how decisions are made from a larger overall organizational perspective. The implication is that integrating

multiple projects with organizational strategy is just as important—but also just as complex—as endeavouring to align individual projects with organizational goals.

A much broader section of the project management literature defines projects as actual vehicles for the delivery and realization of organizational strategy. A review of the project management literature between 1994 and 2003 by Crawford, Morris et al. (2006) indicated a growing emphasis on issues of aligning projects with organizational strategy. It has been suggested that project success dimensions should be determined primarily on the basis of the degree to which they contribute to delivering the strategic goals of the organization (Shenhar et al., 2001). There are also inferences that project and organizational strategy need and should have two-way alignment processes that integrate views of policy, strategy and capability development (Maylor, 2001; Milosevic & Srivannaboon, 2006). Another view is that project management itself is a core functional strategy of organizations, and provides a basis for integrating business and functional strategy (Srivannaboon & Milosevic, 2006). Lehtonen and Martinsuo (2008) argue for a more formal management approach than currently exists when it comes to the initiation of broader change programs in support of organizational strategy, both to provide critical organizational context to the program and to support an appropriate on-going balance between integration and isolation from the organizational parent. Other studies go so far as to explicitly claim that projects are a means of implementing organizational strategy, while also recognizing that project management itself is not viewed from a strategic perspective (Aubry et al., 2012); this reinforces observations by Thomas et al. in 2002 regarding the challenges of selling project management as a strategic capability to senior executives. Vuori et al. (2012) also support the view of projects as vehicles for delivering strategies, recognizing their ability to support the delivery of defined, deliberate and planned strategy as well as emergent strategies that arise from the environment.

While there has been much emphasis on the integration of project strategy and organizational strategy, however, there are also assertions that these concepts struggle for relevance in the actual practices of organizations. In particular, it has been suggested that many organizations and executives fail to make distinctions between strategic and tactical, or strategic and operational, viewpoints; while problems are

perceived at one level, solutions are (erroneously and ineffectively) implemented at another (Brady & Targett, 1995). When projects and project management do attain organizational focus, it tends more often to be in response to crises than to create naturally perceived alignments; senior executives often fail to see the connection between project management and the goals of the organization (Thomas et al., 2002). The risk is that while projects are presented as proactive means of delivering strategy, they are more often seen as means of reacting to tactical and operational crises. Changing this perception requires a reconceptualization of the role of project management,— and of that of the project manager.

Deciding To Expand the Project Manager's Role

Much of the project management literature to date has assumed that project managers are "rational technicians" whose role is to navigate projects through the delivery process on time, on budget and to specification, with little broader consideration of responsibility (Cicmil, 2006). It has been argued in recent years that, to the extent this description was ever true, it should be expanded now to more appropriately reflect reality; that project managers

...should, for example, be able to plan, motivate, evaluate, formulate visions, apply a participative management style, create an agreeable working climate, solve conflicts, negotiate with external contacts, coordinate and integrate, enhance internal communication and find relevant information and knowledge.

(Packendorff, 1995, p. 324)

Morris (1989) argues that the management of projects has always required attention to broad, strategic and often external considerations, and that the role is not simply administrative or technical in nature, despite the fact that many foundational definitions of project management emphasize tactical and execution-oriented aspects.

Some of the arguments over expanding the project management role relate to the overall scope for which actors with the title of "project manager" find themselves responsible. Project responsibility is often seen as beginning with the formulation of projects in response to corporate strategy, supporting the decisions regarding which projects to actually undertake, and working with clients to formulate needs, articulate solutions and gain formal approval (Crawford, Morris et al., 2006). There are

suggestions that project managers are the new strategic leaders who assume full responsibility for the realization of business results. Project managers should be in a position to make complex strategic decisions in the face of ambiguity in furthering the delivery of business projects in a responsive and timely manner (Aubry et al., 2012). Reformulating the role of project manager to encompass strategic responsibilities means questioning when project managers assume responsibility for a project as well as clarifying the scope of their responsibility and authority.

Other arguments for the expansion of the project management role focus more specifically on reflecting the contextual realities which project managers have always faced, and developing the reflexive thinking and situational leadership skills necessary for them to be successful in positions of senior responsibility in delivering large and complex projects. It has been asserted that complex projects behave in ways that are non- or counter-intuitive; learning needs to be an on-going and contextual practice throughout the project, and mechanisms need to be in place to disseminate learnings at project completion (Williams, 2003). There is a need to transition the project management skills and development from a focus on “know what” to “know how” and “know why”; project managers need to develop

...knowledge, practice and behaviours that will support and foster continuous change, creative and critical reflection, self-organized networking, virtual and cross-cultural communication, coping with uncertainty and various frames of reference, increasing self-knowledge and the ability to build and contribute to high performance teams. (Crawford, Morris et al., 2006, p. 727)

This involves the need to engage in what has been referred to as “double-loop” learning, in which practitioners go beyond direct problem solving to reflect on underlying purpose, meaning and cause and effect at the level of overall systems; this involves the development of contextual thinking, reflective reasoning abilities and an understanding and appreciation of power and politics (Thomas & Mengel, 2008; Walker, Anbari et al., 2008; Walker, Cicmil et al., 2008). The implication is that the role of project managers has more breadth and depth than simply the execution of a predefined scope of work; they must be reflective practitioners who understand the needs of the organization, the

value of their projects, and the means by which to best ensure delivery of optimal solutions.

Deciding To Consider Dimensions of Governance

Another dimension of the project management literature which intersects with decisions about projects is the idea of “governance.” Governance roles largely address the oversight of projects, rather than being involved with the actual delivery. There is a recognition that there is a political role, and a corresponding requirement of political will, in engaging in governance processes; establishing and adhering to formal governance expectations has been demonstrated as leading to better project performance, while lower-performing projects were found to have had the governance role short-circuited, resulting in much less scrutiny of the project (Miller & Hobbs, 2005). The emphasis of governance roles has also been identified as being important in the overall definition of project management practices (Morris et al., 2006).

The role of governance in a project context includes choosing the right projects and establishing the correct objectives in response to organizational priorities and strategies; ensuring the appropriate allocation of resources; establishing appropriate strategies for reporting; and ensuring the projects and their results are sustainable (Morris et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2010). While these processes are again often expressed as being rational and normative in nature, there is also a strong political dimension that needs to be understood and investigated further (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius et al., 2003). As an example, one study found within one of its case studies that even where rational decision making was applied, the final decision was always a political one (Williams et al., 2010). This again reinforces the need to understand the political forces by which projects are initiated.

Exploration of the political and power dynamics that underlie purported rational approaches to governance include in particular their use as a source for legitimization of the project, or as a tool for reassurance of project owners (Williams et al., 2010). This notion is reinforced by observations that legitimization can be seen as a key focus for project management as a whole (Cicmil, Hodgson, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2009; Thomas, 1998), providing a façade for rationalism, power, efficiency and control. One of the rationales for project governance is that it serves to ensure that projects do not fail;

it must “...prevent their birth, weeding out those projects that do not adequately address strategic aims, and destroying the seeds of failure before they can germinate” (Smith & Winter, 2010, p. 48). This is achieved through the introduction of stage-gating or gatekeeping mentalities. In many instances, however, these frameworks are simply used as boundary systems between executives and staff that enable executives to stay distant (Artto, Kulvik, Poskela, & Turkulainen, 2011). The danger, then, is that rational approaches are used to legitimize or justify project decisions without addressing the underlying complexities and political influences that are actually present.

Considering the Escalation of Costs – and Failure To Deliver

For project initiation decisions—and the application of governance processes—to be effective, it is necessary to have accurate information from which to work. One of the essential challenges of project initiation has been the ability to determine appropriate and accurate cost estimates. The repeated and regular failure to do so, however, has been argued as not simply a failure of expertise, process or technical judgement, but also as attributable to fundamental psychological biases and political motives (Flyvbjerg, Skamris Holm, & Buhl, 2002). Flyvbjerg et al. (2002) argue that the psychological dimensions can often be attributed to optimism bias, similar to observations that were made in the literature regarding escalation of commitment; the political influences, however, were attributed to the use of deception and lying as tactics in order to encourage the projects to start. This suggests that the political emphasis on project initiation is both significant and consciously manipulative.

Flyvbjerg expanded on these observations in subsequent discussions (2006; 2009). He attributed estimation errors to delusional optimism in the early phases of projects, in which managers and planners “...overestimate benefits and underestimate costs. They involuntarily spin scenarios of success and overlook the potential for mistakes and miscalculations” (Flyvbjerg, 2009, p. 349). Furthermore, he suggested that planners and promoters engage in deliberate deceptions in order to increase the likelihood that their projects, and not those of competitors, are chosen (Flyvbjerg, 2009). This statement was supported by the observations of Cicmil, who suggested that the ambiguity of project plans is also “...an inevitable consequence of gaining necessary support for the project, and of changing preferences over time” (Cicmil, 2006, p. 36). An

alternative view of these machinations was offered by van Marrewijk et al. (2008), who – while also attributing poor estimation to psychological factors—argued that outcomes are less a product of deliberate deception than a result of “...professionals and civil servants who, while managing at the best of their abilities, are faced with complexities, uncertainties, paradoxes and ambiguities” (van Marrewijk et al., 2008, p. 597). Whether complexity-based or deceptive, it is clear that early estimates are often inaccurate and that projects are presented in a manner that is designed to bias decision making towards ensuring that they proceed, rather than permitting decision makers to engage in objective assessment.

The consequences of failing to accurately estimate project costs can be significant. Flyvbjerg, Skamris-Holm et al. (2003) suggest that there are risks generated from cost estimates that are typically ignored or downplayed in decision making when cost estimates are viewed as being systematically and significantly deceptive; there is a doubly negative effect in such circumstances, in that risks themselves are problematic, but ignoring or dismissing them represents another problem entirely. The consequence is misallocation of costs which in turn is likely to lead to the misallocation of scarce resources, which will negatively impact public sector taxpayers or private sector owners (Flyvbjerg et al., 2002). The implication is that there is a very real risk of the initiation process being designed to minimize costs and the perception of risks in order to unduly promote projects proceeding forward.

Considering the Escalation of Benefits – and Failure To Promise (Well)

Just as the consideration of costs is essential to project initiation decisions, so is the assessment of benefits. The typical vehicle used for the assessment of benefits, and comparing benefits with costs, is the business case; significant problems in assessing investment opportunities are, however, frequently associated with the use of business cases (Flyvbjerg, 2009; Tiwana et al., 2006). Typical business case estimates of net-present-value do not take into consideration real options, and they may lead to bias against continuing a project because they ignore the ability for managers to influence and change the project’s course (Tiwana et al., 2006). Other challenges include a lack of expertise in business-case development and financial analysis, as well as significant questions about how transportable financial measures of cost and benefit are from the

private to the public sectors (Schofield & Wilson, 1995). Economic measures dominate the formulation of business cases, at the expense of any consideration of "...health, safety, well-being, the environment and long-term possibilities for collaboration and sustainable development" (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2008, p. 144). As well, there are incentives for promoters of infrastructure projects to overestimate benefits in order to influence the likelihood of their project's receiving funding (Flyvbjerg, 2009). While business cases in theory provide an objective assessment of benefits relative to costs, they can downplay or misrepresent the true implications of proceeding with projects.

Flyvbjerg et al. (2005) conducted an investigation into the estimation of project benefits and, in results that were similar to those relating to underestimation of costs, they found that demand estimates—particularly for rail infrastructure projects—were significantly and systematically inflated. This finding was echoed in investigations into the demand estimates of other large infrastructure projects (see, for example, Anguera, 2006). Fundamentally, systematic and organizational pressures create a situation where it becomes rational (for want of a better term) to emphasize benefits and de-emphasize costs and risks of prospective projects (Flyvbjerg, 2009). This deception is found to be aided by the technical complexity required to plan and model complex infrastructure projects; the use of complex methods of analysis understood by only a select few allows those who wish to manipulate project information to be screened from discovery (Næss, Flyvbjerg, & Buhl, 2006). Ultimately, this creates an environment where it is broadly understood that a project "...that looks highly beneficial on paper is more likely to get funded than one that does not" (Flyvbjerg, 2009, p. 352). The implication is that business cases conceal the true implications of proceeding with projects through technical complexity and the manipulation of benefits to present as favourable a picture as possible.

Conclusions Regarding Deciding About Projects

The need for a greater understanding of how decisions about projects are made has been discussed in depth in this paper, from a number of perspectives. Numerous challenges have been associated with decision making about projects, however. Even where normative processes exist, as in the case of portfolio management, there may be failures to adhere to them as a result of political, power or social issues. Such

challenges are echoed in the discussion of escalation. While it is argued that projects should be increasingly aligned with strategy, and that the project management role should be strategic in nature, this is to an extent an attempt to "write in" responsibilities that are not being observed in practice. Explorations of governance collide headlong with specific examples of where governance does not occur, where costs are routinely underrepresented and benefits are overstated.

These challenges speak to a need to understand why appropriate decisions about projects fail to occur, despite a broad call for more appropriate decision making and in the face of numerous prescriptions for how it should be done. Drawing on the observations from the previous section, in which interpretivist and constructivist approaches offer frameworks for exploring the power, political and social dynamics at work, adopting a critical stance in investigating how decisions about projects are made would appear to offer some benefits.

Deciding to Initiate Projects

The foregoing sections highlighted the multiplicity of perspectives and enduring challenges within the project management literature about how decisions are made within projects, and how decision are made about projects. In particular, they pointed out the influence that social forces, politics and power play on the decision making process; while strongly referenced in the broader literature, these issues are only more recently being introduced to the project management literature. Understanding these influences and how organizational actors manage these them in supporting project initiation appears to be a useful and valuable focus of inquiry.

This section explores what little project management literature there is that investigates project initiation decisions through adoption of a critical stance. It begins with a discussion of research regarding the project initiation processes that explore how they are affected by social, political and power perspectives, and that discusses the need for a more critical investigation of the front end of projects. In particular, the section introduces a recent discussion of the project initiation process from an explicitly critical viewpoint: this appears to provide a conceptual base from which further investigation is possible.

Integrating Initiation With Psychological and Political Forces

The underlying factors that influence irrational, unwarranted or subjective project initiation decisions are numerous. Flyvbjerg et al. (2009) suggest that delusions and deception are complementary, rather than alternative, explanations; delusions include susceptibility to the planning fallacy and issues of anchoring and adjustment, while deceptions include principle-agent problems in which actors use self-interest, asymmetric information and different risk preferences as tools of deceit to win or keep business. Other studies identify issues related to a lack of clear strategy, where problems at the project level are a product of board-level actors failing to provide clear policy and priorities (e.g., Maylor, 2001). Still others suggest much deeper levels of deception, in which the effort of initiating projects provides ample opportunity for actors to make claims and convictions to which they do not necessarily adhere, to demand certainty in the face of the unknown, and to use uncertainty as a way of manufacturing political hypocrisy (e.g., van Marrewijk et al., 2008). Clearly, any understanding of project initiation decisions needs to specifically accommodate the possibility of deception, negligence or manipulation,

Strategies to remove or manage these biases include the introduction of reference class forecasting as means of comparing projects with others that are similar in order to validate estimates of cost and benefit; this strategy is based upon the assumption that "...ventures are typically more similar than actors assume, even ventures that on the surface of things may appear entirely different" (Flyvbjerg, 2008, p. 8). Attempting to address political influences of deception have thus far resulted in observations that the power relations governing estimation and project initiation themselves need to change; greater transparency and accountability must be introduced into the project initiation process (Flyvbjerg, 2009). The challenge in supporting project initiation is develop approaches that actually enable the adoption of such transparency and accountability.

Integrating Initiation With Strategic Management

To address the challenges associated with a project initiation decision requires that it be situated within the larger context of the strategic management of the organization, and also requires that the dynamics of those decision making processes

be explored. For some, project management has (or should have been) long considered a part of the strategic management domain; “The art and skills of project management reach right into the earliest stages of project initiation” (Morris, 1989, p. 184). Research perspectives have positioned projects as largely responsive to the deliberate formulations that emerge from the strategic management process of the organization, while still needing to accommodate more emergent notions of strategy (Artto, Kujala, Dietrich, & Martinsuo, 2008; Vuori et al., 2012). Other perspectives view business projects as “strategic interventions” that influence the overall process of strategic management as means of influencing business change (e.g., Winter et al., 2006). Still others place the project initiation decision, and the role of projects, in a more entrepreneurial context that positions projects as both related to and yet autonomous from the larger organization (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009; Vuori et al., 2012). While identifying the need to integrate with project strategy is easy to state, adopting strategies to actually do so is considerably more complex.

Approaches to improving the integration of project initiation in organizational strategy include reframing how the idea of project strategy (and organizational strategy) is developed. Proponents suggest the need to establish an alignment between organizational strategy and project strategy (Maylor, 2001; Milosevic & Srivannaboon, 2006; Shenhar et al., 2001). Others point out the need to allow for a more iterative form of initiation than is standard now, one that enables a more dynamic and interactive evolution of strategy in response to uncertainties (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2008). Further investigations have proposed a reframing of the concept of what constitutes “project strategy” and the nature of how planning progresses in support of organizational strategy (Pitsis et al., 2003). Still other suggestions include the need for explicit recognition of the strategic management processes in organizations as having both deliberate and emergent aspects (Artto et al., 2008; Vuori et al., 2012). While there have been various proposals regarding how to accomplish the integration of projects within strategy, what remains is the need to investigate how this is accomplished in actual practice and to examine the implications of such strategies being adopted within organizations.

Encouraging Research Into the Front End of Projects

While there are some suggestions of solutions and approaches to the inherent political, power, social and psychological challenges associated with project initiation, the limitations and barriers that result from current levels of understanding of these influencing forces are acknowledged in the majority of these discussions. The escalation literature has seen calls for the further study of the dynamics of both escalation and exit, with a particular emphasis on multi-method and multi-level investigations; these specifically suggest that drawing on experimental, archival, questionnaire and case study data would be potentially fruitful (Ross & Staw, 1993). There have been proposals for more investigations of cognitive psychology, investigating how the templates that drive framing, anchoring and optimism biases are formed and utilized; these have also included consideration of cognitive dissonance theory, in which the meaning of decisions is changed by altering the nature of the underlying alternatives (Thomas, 1998). Further study of the causes of psychological bias and particularly political deception have also been suggested (Flyvbjerg, 2009). These research proposals in particular emphasize investigating the dynamics of power, politics and influence, rather than the normative and rational process approaches that have dominated much of the literature to date.

Embedded within suggestions for further research has also been the need to better understand the complexity and uncertainty associated with project initiation decisions. Explicitly rational processes are perceived to ignore the existence of subjective rationality, leading to projects being initiated for unclear reasons, with greater emphasis on process than outcomes and despite changes in the environment rendering objectives obsolete or undesirable (Packendorff, 1995). Initiation decisions are often the products of unclear objectives, devised by stakeholders with conflicting views, where there is a need for advocacy as much as rational analysis (Winter et al., 2006). While politics and power are operative forces in normal human functioning, arguments are made that this is not necessarily the result of conscious intent or malevolent design as much as it is a product of professionals confronting issues of ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity, and that as a result issues of power, ambiguity and paradox must be better understood (van Marrewijk et al., 2008). The implication for future research into project

initiation is that there is a need to navigate a complex web of dynamics that integrate influences of politics, power, ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity with the motivations and limitations of individual actors.

Framing the Way Forward

A particularly promising line of enquiry in investigating the path forward in understanding project initiation decisions is that of Smith and Winter (2010). Their initial study specifically focussed on the "messy social processes" that lead to projects being proposed and initiated. Not simply a product of rational and normative techniques, this process carries

...awareness of projects as socially constructed entities. Rather than being pre-existing objects to be subjected to the instrumental techniques of conventional project management, they are created and shaped by individual players in the workplace. (Smith & Winter, 2010, p. 48)

In framing their discussion of project initiation, Smith & Winter (2010) identified six key dimensions that comprise a framework for evaluating how project initiation decisions are shaped:

- **The control model of projects.** Viewing project management as having primarily a control focus echoes the observation of numerous other researchers (see, for example: Maylor, 2001; Packendorff, 1995; Söderlund, 2004a; Thomas & Tjaeder, 2000). Smith and Winter specifically identified two narrative views of control: that of project management as determining the best and most orderly and efficient route of delivery; and that of project management as a tyranny that destroys autonomy, initiative and creativity. They also raised issues regarding when a project actually becomes a project, with the amusingly relevant warning to "...beware premature projectification" (p. 53).
- **Tribal power.** Recognizing projects as social constructions, Smith and Winter also acknowledge that they are constructed by diverse groups with diverse agendas. Projects therefore need to both acknowledge and consciously address the expectations of this multi-tribal world. This requires that project shapers act as expert players within the social world of tribes, consulting, facilitating and leading towards a unified view of the project. This reinforces the call for project managers to be adaptive

experts and reflective practitioners (Cicmil, 2006; Crawford, Morris et al., 2006; Thomas & Mengel, 2008).

- **Transformation and value.** Smith and Winter discuss the need for the project manager to focus on the value of the project, however that is defined. This builds on calls to revisit and redefine how success is perceived and evaluated (Steffens et al., 2007; Winter, Smith, Cooke-Davies et al., 2006; Winter, Smith, Morris et al., 2006).
- **Enacted reality.** For projects to be viewed as real and initiated, Smith and Winter argue for the need to create clarity out of the chaos and complexity of how projects are defined and interpreted. “Any version of the project scope can be open to challenge as different groups manoeuvre to promote their tribal interests. Project progress, however, requires some degree of stability of purpose, and this is achieved through enactment” (p. 55). Referencing in part the work of Weick (1995), Smith and Winter say that this requires the project manager to act as the sensemaker of the project, as well as demonstrating its reality through co-ordinating the production of artifacts which can be seen, inspected and queried.
- **External dynamics – “peripety.”** Smith and Winter define “peripety” as the Aristotelian concept of the plot point in a play where new information transforms our understanding of what happens. “It is not only the outcomes that are changed, but the questions that frame the project thinking and plans” (p. 55). This concept recognizes that projects are subject to the influence of external forces at different points in their lives, and that expert practitioners will go out of their ways to engage with external influencers, and to continue to actively shape perceptions as change emerges.
- **Shaper’s volition.** “Volition” is identified by Smith and Winter as a powerful and significant determinant of the form that a project ultimately takes. “For each project, the scope becomes what it is because of the strong action of an individual who chooses to shape it in that way” (p. 56). The action of project shapers are constrained by the forces within the context in which they operate, and by the agendas and motivations of the actors with whom they interact; at the same time they are enacting their own roles within the organization: “...choosing allegiances, supporting their personal agenda within the organization, protecting their credibility and reputation, and, if failure is on the cards, manoeuvring themselves into a winning position” (p. 56).

The focus of Smith and Winter's exploration of the shaping and forming of projects is on the expertise, wisdom and reflexivity of practitioners. Their operative assumption is that project initiation is less a product of rational and normative functions of gate-keeping and good governance, and more a product of the degree to which those who shape projects are able to operate as reflective, intuitive, pragmatic and ethical players within the organizational contexts in which they operate.

The relevance of the conceptual model put forward by Smith and Winter is that it firmly establishes the role of the project shaper in the project initiation process, and frames that role as one that operates inherently within the social, political and power structures of the organization. Further exploration of the role of shaping projects requires an understanding of the activities and—to the degree it is possible to do so—the motives of the individuals fulfilling this role. Smith and Winter view this as being possible to achieve only through in-depth research into the actuality of projects. “We hope that the arguments we have set out here, promoting the central role of the project shaper and setting out a framework for understanding the activities of such an individual, can form a basis for such research” (Smith & Winter, 2010, p. 59).

The conceptual model developed by Smith and Winter (2010) would appear to provide a promising perspective from which to investigate project initiation decisions. The current model, however, is the result of a small number of case studies which were reviewed to extrapolate the dimensions that have been proposed. There is no underlying theoretical framework, and no theoretical lens suggested for its further development. In order to evaluate the degree to which their conceptualization of the role of “project shaper” is appropriate to the study of project initiation, and the dimensions which they discuss are relevant, it will be necessary to establish a firm theoretical foundation.

Conclusion

The theoretical grounding of project management is not uniform, and draws on a broad array of fields, domains of research and perspectives. Despite a multiplicity of standards, project management practices are often viewed as having little to do with “real world” practices. In particular, there is a significant emphasis on control and execution at the expense of a broader understanding of managing in the face of

complexity, uncertainty and politics of the kind that are experienced and reported by those actually involved in managing projects. As well as varied perspectives in regard to project management, there are also significant differences of interpretation of what constitutes a project, and where its boundaries lie, further complicating what measures are required to support effective project management, and in particular the initiation of projects.

Decision making in a project context is shown by the literature to be equally problematic. Decision making is itself not a rational process, but is subject to broad social and political influences. Significant political forces influence project decisions, as do internal factors relating to the decision makers, comprising knowledge, expertise and personality. These influence how individuals approach deciding about projects where they must be "boundedly rational" about their choices, making decisions in the face of limited information, compressed timeframes and high levels of uncertainty. How decisions are made in a project context has therefore been identified in the literature as a significant area of emerging interest.

While the path that has been followed thus far appears promising, it leads into territory that has only recently been explored in the project management literature. Much of the research to date has been rational and normative, assuming that initiation decisions are the result of processes, and that improving decision making effectiveness requires the development of more robust and comprehensive processes. This contrasts with an alternative view which asserts that project initiation decisions need to align with the strategic priorities of the organization, and that ensuring this alignment requires establishing effective approaches that accommodate considerable complexity and uncertainty. These perspectives emerge in a number of related contexts, including discussions of escalation, portfolio management, integration with the strategic management literature and redefinition of the project management role. Project initiation decisions are increasingly seen to be subject to the influences of politics, power and social processes that have been variously described as engaging in active deception or responding to evolving complexity. To effectively navigate these uncertainties and more comprehensively investigate the means by which project initiation decisions are arrived

at, we need to understand the broader theoretical underpinnings and deeper research foundations that underlie the process of making decisions.

A recent and promising insight into project initiation decisions emerges through an exploration of the role of the project shaper, someone who is responsible for supporting and navigating opportunities through the initiation process and championing them within the organization. A paper by Smith and Winter (2010) outlines the influences observed through a limited assessment of the role, illuminated by three case studies. While promising in direction, the empirical support within the paper is limited due to the small number of cases on which it is developed and there is little theoretical development or discussion of a theoretical lens that could support its further development. While recognizing these limitations, the paper does provide a useful perspective from which the process of project initiation might further be explored. The next chapter provides a review of the decision making literature, exploring the contributions that it can provide to a more in-depth understanding of project initiation decisions. The review of the decision making literature endeavours in particular to evaluate the dimensions identified in the conceptual model of project initiation proposed by Smith and Winter (2010, and the role of individuals in shaping the project initiation process.

Chapter 3 - Decision Making

Introduction

Given the critical nature of decisions in regard to how projects are managed within organizations—and in particular the strategic importance of the decision to undertake a project in the first place—there is a clear need to further explore the decision making literature to identify relevant strategies and guidance. This chapter provides an overview of the perspectives offered by the decision making literature, with a view to improving our understanding of project initiation decisions. The theoretical foundations and fundamental definitions associated with any discipline are important, and this chapter begins with a discussion of what decision making is, and an exploration of the foundational works from which the broader literature is derived. Building upon this base, the chapter moves into a discussion of how rational theories gave decision making its initial form, and how behavioural theories subsequently supported the exploration of decision making in the context of what actual decision makers do. While the literature of decision making is vast, this review focusses on behavioural decision making models, and in particular those associated with rule systems. Decision making as rule following is explored in detail, as a framework that recognizes and responds to the political, social and power dynamics of organizations; this perspective helps to establish how actual decision makers decide, and it is therefore a promising direction to take in order to increase our understanding of how project shapers approach their roles. Finally, empirical studies that take a behavioural view and that in particular adopt a rule-following approach are surveyed to help us understand some outstanding influences, problems and issues related to decision making.

Exploring What Decision Making is About

Decision making as a theoretical discipline has much in common with project management. The decision making literature has a much broader depth, and a much greater level of focus, than does that of project management. It has been the target of considerable theorizing and extensive investigation. Despite this, as in the case of project management there is considerable concern that decision making has: no

underlying theoretical foundation (Cyert & March, 1956; Kahneman, 2003a; Langley et al., 1995; March, 1972; March, 1978b; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Simon, 1955; Simon, 1959); no consistent definition of its practices (Brunsson, 1982; Burns & Dietz, 1992; Cohen, 2006; Cyert & March, 1956; Cyert & Williams, 1993; Langley et al., 1995; Lundberg, 1961; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Nutt, 1984b; Simon, 1965; Starbuck, 1983); and that there is no clear agreement on its definition (Brunsson, 1982; Langley, 1991; Langley et al., 1995; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Simon, 1965). Significantly, both disciplines emerged from the broader domain of operations research in the years following World War II (Simon, 1965; Simon, 1987). Simon (1987) notes the influence of a number of tools, including linear programming and critical path scheduling, that were formative to the development of both project management and decision making. Like project management, decision making has been broadly criticized for its perceived excessive emphasis on rational and normative modes of research at the expense of more subjective or interpretive views (see, for example Cyert & Hedrick, 1972; Lindblom, 1959; Lindblom, 1979; Nelson & Winter, 1974; Simon, 1955; Simon, 1965), and perhaps most damningly for its continued persistence with a rational and normative stance despite evidence that this view does not align with actual observed behaviours (Lundberg, 1961).

While there have been some points of convergence of the literatures of project management and decision making, as noted in the previous chapter, for the most part the two fields have remained separate and distinct, with little overlap of scholarly interest or subject matter content. The notable exception has been the adoption of the concept of "bounded rationality" in some recent project management papers, as discussed in the previous chapter. These discussions have tended to adopt a simplistic view, a criticism that has also been noted in other applications of bounded rationality as a concept (Gavetti, Levinthal, & Ocasio, 2007). Gaining a greater level of convergence between the concepts of decision making and project management therefore requires exploring the theoretical foundations of decision making and identifying where overlaps exist or contributions can be made to a better understanding project management decisions.

Lack of Decisiveness About Decision Making Theory

While there is a vast and recognizable decision making literature, the component works are derived from numerous theoretical perspectives. Most frequently, studies consciously draw from two or more disciplines, including: psychology and economics (Kahneman, 2003b; Simon, 1955; Simon, 1959); operations, economics and management science (Simon, 1965; Simon, 1978); economics, political science, social psychology and management science (March, 1972); microeconomics, decision science, management science and operations analysis (March, 1978b); and cognitive psychology, social psychology, management science and political science (Mintzberg et al., 1976). In this way, decision making embraces many influences and draws on the insights of a variety of independent literatures and disciplines. This diversity results in a breadth of perspectives on the process of decision making, the subject of decision and the premises on which decisions are based. Commenting on the developments of the previous twenty years of research, March observed that

...it is clear that we do not have a single, widely-accepted, precise behavioural theory of choice. But I think it can be argued that the empirical and theoretical efforts of the past twenty years have brought us closer to understanding decision processes. (March, 1978b, p. 591)

Integrating these perspectives into a holistic understanding of decision making requires first understanding the diversity of insights that have been developed to date.

Lack of Conclusions About Decision Making

One of the inherent challenges in the study of decision making is establishing clarity on what is meant by the term. March (1978b) suggested that the current understanding of decision making is a product of conceptual vignettes, each of which is at best tenuously linked to others, rather than representing a single coherent structure. “In effect, the effort has identified major aspects of some key processes that appear to be reflected in decision making; but the ecology of these processes is not well captured by any current theory” (March, 1978b, p. 591). A key consideration in relation to decision making is at what level of analysis decisions are explored; it has been argued, even by the same researcher, that these may at different times appropriately be the focus of individuals, groups or organizations (Brunsson, 1982). Most particularly,

despite the earlier assertions of March, there is a wide diversity of views regarding how decision making is actually accomplished. Decision making has been variously suggested to: be the product of both processes of interaction and processes of decision (Lundberg, 1961); involve different processes of identification, development and selection (Barnard, 1938); reflect different steps of search, synthesis and analysis (Nutt, 1984b); be an irrational product of organizational bias (Brunsson, 1982); be the institution of rules that reflect the culture of the organization (Burns & Dietz, 1992); and be processes driven by the emotion, imagination and memories of the decision maker that result in sudden crystallizations of thought (Langley et al., 1995). As a consequence, as in the case of projects there is a multiplicity of perspectives regarding the nature of decisions, the location of their boundaries and the means by which they are accomplished.

Identifying when decision making occurs is also a point of some controversy in the literature. Barnard (1938) explicitly made the link between means and ends, arguing that the decision of what ends to pursue were a necessary precursor to action. Much of actual research behaviour, however, is argued to approach this construct in reverse: researchers tend to study action, where decision is assumed as some identifiable moment of commitment that must have previously occurred (Langley et al., 1995). “In other words, if an organization *did* something, it must have previously *decided* to do so” (Langley et al., 1995, p. 265). Starbuck (1983) argued that decision did not necessarily precede action, but instead was often a justification for action. Brunsson (1982) decouples decision and action completely, asserting that decisions do not necessarily lead to actions any more than actions are necessarily the product of decisions. Cohen et al. (1972) further deconstructed the understanding of decision, arguing that

...an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work. (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2)

This breakdown and compartmentalization of the subject illustrates the complexity of understanding the existence, influences and processes surrounding decisions and decision making.

Lack of Clarity In Definitions of Decision

While there is considerable disagreement on the process of decision making, there is an equally broad interpretation of what constitutes a decision. Fundamental questions have been raised about what a “decision” is, where it stops and starts, and whether it is in fact a relevant point of discussion (Mintzberg, Waters, Pettigrew, & Butler, 1990). The more straightforward interpretations of the word “decision” presume that it is a specific commitment to action, usually involving the commitment of resources (Langley et al., 1995; Mintzberg et al., 1976). A decision is also presumed to be a conscious choice between at least two alternative actions (Brunsson, 1982); a counterpoint to this assertion, however, is that a decision is often simply a choice between acceptance or rejection of a single course of action—in essence, the choice between doing something or doing nothing (Cyert, Simon, & Trow, 1956). These discussions of decision, however, presume a finite and specific point in time. Simon (1965) argued that this was not in fact the case, that a decision is the product of a complex process of interaction that extends over a considerable period of time. Langley (1991) suggested that the definition also needed to extend to include a large number of people; that organizational decisions were the results of interactions among numerous actors each working through his or her own personal decision making processes. Such points highlight issues associated with identifying concepts and making assertions regarding what is essentially a social construct, as decision making is.

Underlying all of these definitions of “decision” is a problem similar to the issue encountered with the definition of a “project”: the presumption that a decision is, in fact, a ‘thing’ (Lundberg, 1961). In part, this is a problem of reification: “Nouns are the tyrants of the English languages. When we introduce a new noun, we create the illusion that there must exist a recognizable entity corresponding to it...” (Simon, 1987, p. 11); in other words, coining the word “decision” presumes the presence of a concrete, substantial and comprehensible entity. Decisions are even more ethereal than projects in that they may leave no evidence in their wake to acknowledge they were made (Mintzberg et al., 1990). The issue of reification, however, is not the only existential challenge facing those who choose to analyze decisions: Langley et al. (1995) argue

that decisions themselves may not exist at all, but may simply be constructs in the eye of the observer: "...that decision, like so many other concepts in organization theory, is sometimes an artificial construct, a psychological one that imputes commitment to action" (Langley et al., 1995, p. 266). The implication is that the presence of action does not necessarily imply the concrete, deliberate and conscious act of having made a decision.

Apart from questioning whether a decision is in reality a thing, or whether it did in fact occur, there is a separate and distinct issue of reification that occurs when we consider decisions that are deemed to be "organizational" in nature. The vast body of decision making literature considers the concept of "organizational decision" to be a fundamental one) (see, for example, Brunsson, 1982; Langley, 1991; Langley et al., 1995; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Mintzberg et al., 1990; Simon, 1964; Simon, 1965). Organizations themselves are subject to reification; this raises the question of who makes decisions that are deemed "organizational," and to what end.

Either we must explain organizational behavior in terms of the goals of the individual members of the organization, or we must postulate the existence of one or more organization goals, over and above the goals of the individuals.
(Simon, 1964, p. 2)

The construct of the "organizational decision" has also been argued to be problematic in that it "...reinforces an undifferentiated, mechanistic image of one or a few central decision makers, thereby diverting attention from the fact that organizational actions do not always correspond directly to leadership intentions" (Mintzberg et al., 1990, p. 4). Finally, the word "decision" is at times subject to substitution. Alternative terms that researchers have employed in its stead include: "choice" (Lundberg, 1961); "ritual" (March, 1987); "problem" (Starbuck, 1983); "pattern" (Fredrickson & Mitchell, 1984) and "allocation" (Brunsson, 1990). Each of these distinctions has been designed to address a particular nuance or particularity of interpretation, or in some cases the degree of deliberation involved; at the same time such substitute words certainly complicate the identification and evaluation of what actually constitutes a decision.

Multiple Perspectives of "Decision"

Decision itself is not a single and unified concept. Whether defined as choice, problem, issue or commitment, there is a follow-on clarification that needs to be made as to *what kind* of decision is actually being considered. A common distinction in the literature is between choices that are perceived as routine and repetitive in nature versus choices that are novel, unstructured or uncertain (Lundberg, 1961). Non-routine decisions were a significant area of focus for the majority of researchers, representing as they do broad dimensions of uncertainty that involve basic long-range questions about the whole strategy of an organization (Cyert et al., 1956). Within this domain of strategic complexity, Levinthal and March (1993) argued that decision-making may address three grand problems:

- problems of ignorance, involving uncertainty about the future;
- problems of conflict, where multiple nested actors are required to confront multiple nested perspectives, each with inconsistent preferences and identities;
- problems of ambiguity, involving a lack of clarity in terms of preference and identity.

This raises interesting implications for project initiation decisions, in that they are typically non-routine in nature, and issues regarding uncertainty, inconsistency of preferences and problems of ambiguity can be considered present in the majority of them.

The degree to which a decision can be considered effective, appropriate or successful depends in part upon whether one evaluates the results of the decision or the process by which it was attained. This distinction involves discriminating between "ends" and "means," initially defined by Weber (1964) as delineating substantive rationality (appropriateness in the context of overall values) and formal rationality (the degree to which appropriate calculations were applied). In decision making, these constructs were further refined by Simon & Thaler (1986) to include the terms "substantive rationality" (in which a decision is appropriate to the achievement of given goals within the limits imposed by conditions and constraints, and rationality is viewed in terms of the choices it produces) and "procedural rationality" (in which a decision is the outcome of appropriate deliberation, and rationality is viewed in terms of the processes

that are employed. Dosi and Egidi (1991) further elaborated on the issue by introducing the terms “substantive uncertainty” (lack of information about environmental events) and “procedural uncertainty” (the competence gap that exists in problem solving). Decision making can therefore be assessed through the lens of process or result, and from the perspective of the clarity and uncertainty associated with both concepts.

Insights for Project Initiation Decisions

While it has been noted that the decision making literature has significant breadth and depth, it has also been observed that there are multiple perspectives in viewing decisions, decision theory, decision processes and the rationality of decision making. In evaluating the context of project initiation decisions, some specific insights and implications emerge. By their nature, projects are unique and—at the level being discussed here—frequently strategic. It can be presumed, therefore, that the decisions regarding their initiation run more to the end of the spectrum defined by “unique” and “novel” than they do that of “routine” and “repetitive,” at least in consideration of the content, or substantive rationality, of the decision (Cyert et al., 1956). In researching projects, there is evidence of action once they have been initiated; the difficulty, as noted by Langley et al. (1995) is that the presence of action *assumes* decision. Ascertaining the presence of a decision requires determining whether such a preceding event in fact occurred; this in turn requires a further elaboration on the processes of decision which might be employed. The implication is that the investigation of decision making requires a clear understanding of the process underlying decisions, and the degree to which this process leads to something that is recognized and acknowledged as a decision. The next section provides a more detailed exploration of decision making processes and their implications for the understanding of project initiation decisions.

Exploring Decision Making Processes

Understanding the processes underlying the making of a decision first requires an exploration of the essential approaches to decision making that have been articulated within the literature. In allowing for the investigation of project initiation decisions, it will be necessary to identify those models that are specifically appropriate to the process of making project initiation decisions and that therefore offer guidance in how initiation decisions may most appropriately be approached. This section explores

the development of decision making theory, and the major streams of theory that have evolved regarding the decision making processes. It provides a review of critiques that have been offered regarding different theoretical stances. It concludes with a review of the perspectives that may be most appropriate for investigating the means by which project initiation decisions are made.

Early Development of Decision Making

Decision making in an economic and strategic context goes back more than 250 years, to a paper by Bernoulli to the 1738 proceedings of the Royal Academy of Science in St. Petersburg, explaining a phenomenon of risk-based decision making that came to be known as the “St. Petersburg paradox.” This paper was the source of the initial principles of rational decision making and “expected utility theory”, in which in all instances decision makers are presumed to make decisions in order to maximize expected value. Many aspects of expected utility theory are still prevalent in the assumed behaviours of economic decision making today (Blavatsky, 2005). In a corporate and managerial context, the initial principles of decision making can be found in the work of Fayol (1949), who defined managerial activities as including planning, organization, command, coordination and control (Pugh & Hickson, 1996), concepts that are directly relevant to our understanding of project management. The first direct definition of decision making, however, is found in the works of Barnard, who identified the role of decision making as one of the chief functions of the executive (Barnard, 1938), and made explicit the idea of decision as the delineation of ends—the objective to be realized—and means—the methods to be employed—that is the essence of much subsequent exploration of decision making. In particular, Barnard distinguished between the principles of decision making by the individual and those made on behalf of, or in the interests of, the organization. In a discussion of the decision making environment, Barnard states that “...within organizations, especially of complex types, there is a technique of decision, an organizational process of thinking, which may not be analogous to that of the individual” (1938, p. 139).

The exploration of decision making required a definition as to the focus and nature of decision in organizations, particularly with respect to strategy and long-term organizational development. In their paper analyzing a major business decision, Cyert

et al. noted that "...a realistic description and theory of the decision-making process are of central importance to business administration and organizational theory" (1956, p. 237). The result is that "...for the first time decision making became the focus of a major work of administration" (Lundberg, 1961, p. 49). This focus led to the development of several rational models of decision making.

Rational Models of Decision Making

The principles of rational decision making in an economic context have their foundation in the work of von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944), who first advanced the notion of economic utility as a means of objectively measuring and quantifying the value of personal preferences. This is still, for many, the dominant basis of economic thinking and rational decision making (Cyert et al., 1956; Lundberg, 1961). The application of rational utility models to investment decisions extends to the work of Markowitz (1959), who initially applied the use of rational models in general, and expected utility theory in particular, to portfolio selection techniques. These expanded to increasingly refined means and strategies of rationally evaluating risks and uncertainties (see, for example Cord, 1964; Galai, 1975; Horne, 1966).

Fundamental to the models of rational decision making and choice is the idea of "economic man" who, in being economic, is also "rational." Faced with an array of different, specified options, each option of which has different consequences attached to it, "economic man" has a system of preferences against which the consequences of each option are evaluated, from which the option with the highest expected value is selected (Cyert et al., 1956; Simon, 1955). Behaving in a manner consistent with rational decision making means that, in all decisions, a person will universally select the option that maximizes their expected value (Simon, 1959). Underlying all of this is a presumption that decision making as a process is focussed on the attainment of certainty, that goals are known and that all information regarding a decision task can be provided (Nutt, 1976). The implication is that arriving at a rational decision requires perfect clarity of goals, universal availability of information, prescient identification of options and complete assessment of all implications.

Rational decision making has faced extensive criticism (admittedly, largely from advocates for other models of decision making, and particularly behaviouralist models).

Chief among these criticisms is the contention that rational models of decision making do not reflect how decisions are actually made (Simon, 1955; Simon, 1959). In particular, advocates of behavioural decision making argue that rational approaches ignore the fact that decision makers possess modest calculation powers, and that a normative theory—if it is to be useful—should only call for information that can reasonably be obtained and calculations that can actually be performed (Simon, 1965). In contrast to a theory that expects all options to be identified and all considerations to be appropriately weighed and valued, real actors simply do not have the computational and cognitive powers necessary to successfully employ rational models (Nelson & Winter, 2002). Empirical studies found that the comprehensiveness of analysis called for in rational models had a consistently negative relationship with performance (Fredrickson, 1984a; Fredrickson & Mitchell, 1984). Simon (1959) cited issues related to presumptions of information availability in competitive situations, stating that “...rationality requires one to outguess one’s opponents but not to be outguessed by them, and this is clearly not a consistent requirement if applied to all the actors” (Simon, 1959, p. 266). Finally, while acknowledging that economists have offered corresponding criticisms of behavioural models, stating that they have failed to offer a coherent alternative to rational choice models, Daniel Kahneman argued in the speech he delivered in accepting the Nobel prize in economics,

This complaint is only partially justified: psychological theories cannot match the elegance and precision of formal normative models of belief and choice, but this is just another way of saying that rational models are psychologically unrealistic. (Kahneman, 2003a, p. 1449)

The implication is that decision making is complex, difficult, subjective and inconsistent, and that accurate understanding of decision making requires scholars to explicitly embrace the psychological complexity and strategies for simplification that underlie how decisions are actually made by individual actors.

Behavioural Models of Decision Making

The development of behavioural models of decision making were very much a reaction to the rational models that dominated the perspectives of the time. The objective was to

replace the global rationality of economic man with a kind of rational behaviour that is compatible with the access to information and the computational capacities that are actually possessed by organisms, including man, in the kinds of environments in which such organisms exist. (Simon, 1955, p. 99)

Simon (1965) went on to argue that this computational and predictive ability was at best extremely crude, and that there was a complete lack of evidence that the computations called for by rational choice could be performed. The presumption was that actual behaviour reflected the limits on conceptual and computing capabilities of decision makers, even when supported by automation and advances in computer technology (Simon, 1959). Simon (1959) highlighted a number of seminal principles that would become foundational to the development of behavioural decision making theory, including the notion of satiation and the consideration that decision makers were less interested in maximizing utility than they were in minimizing regret. He also advanced the principle that information has a cost, suggesting that there are optimal amounts of information-gathering activity that are realistic in evaluating the relative merits of alternatives. A fundamental consideration in the development of behavioural models were that they were based upon the capacity and limitations of human perception, and that perceived reality was vastly different from the “real” world (Simon, 1959; Simon, 1965). “The decision-maker's model of the world encompasses only a minute fraction of all of the relevant characteristics of the real environment, and his inferences extract only a minute fraction of all the information that is even present in his model” (Simon, 1959, p. 272). Simon (1997) also offered a psychological critique of the assumptions of rationality in decision making, arguing that the limits of knowledge regarding means and consequences meant that rationality was at best approximate. This provided a foundation for the development of the concept of “bounded rationality” (Cohen, 2007a). March & Simon (1993) fully developed the concept of bounded rationality, in particular highlighting the principles of satisficing and sequential search. Additional developments of bounded rationality included the emergence of conflict, bargaining and coalition behaviour (Gavetti et al., 2007). Cyert & March (1992) also highlighted the adaptability of organizations over time, in response to local search and feedback on organizational performance relative to aspirations (March, 2007). Unlike the idealistic presumptions of

perfect data and comprehensive analysis associated with rational techniques, behavioural decision making approaches are rooted in the limitations and constraints faced by actors constrained by limited cognitive capacity.

Behavioural Responses to Physical and Practical Limitations. First suggested by Simon (1997) and elaborated by March & Simon (1993), bounded rationality accommodates a number of “heuristic methods” that have come to be associated with actual decision making practices. In particular, bounded rationality reflects the reality that decision makers need to address the design and discovery of alternatives, which means that they often “satisfice”—or settle for “good enough” answers—and do not necessarily arrive at optimal solutions (or any solution) (Simon, 1955). It also reflects the reality that decision making can be best—or only—understood as a means of actors confronting their limits of comprehension and calculation (Simon, 1979). Bounded rationality acknowledges that decision making is based upon incomplete information about alternatives and their consequences, and that information is not innocent: it is the product of different coalitions in organizations pursuing differing objectives (March, 1987). Bounded rationality therefore explicitly challenges the presumption of comprehensive and perfectly rational techniques by finding them to be physically impossible and pragmatically inappropriate, in that they ignore the very real limitations of individual decision makers in identifying and evaluating information.

Behavioural Responses to Cognitive Limitations. While bounded rationality is designed to address the physical and practical limitations associated with decision making, the development of understanding of cognitive biases, heuristics and frames has been another significant area of development within behavioural theories of decision making. This research

...attempted to obtain a map of bounded rationality, by exploring the systematic biases that separate the beliefs that people have and the choices that they make from the optimal beliefs and choices assumed in rational-agent models.

(Kahneman, 2003a, p. 1449)

Historically, most of the literature dealing with risky choice assumed a decision maker who was risk averse. The result was the concept of a decision maker whose utility model was universally concave; in other words, the decision maker would depart from

risk-averse behaviour only under certain unusual circumstances (Fiegenbaum & Thomas, 1988). This presumption did not reconcile with observations of actual behaviours, however, leading Tversky and Kahneman to outline a model that considered a distinction between decision modes that reflected the sharp line that most people draw between opportunity costs and losses (Kahneman, 2003a).

In advancing the notion of prospect theory, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) endeavoured to address many of the challenges observed in the failures of expected utility theory, and to explicitly reflect many of the cognitive biases and heuristics associated with intuitive decision making. Prospect theory articulates some of the essential principles of judgement that limit the rationality of choice (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). Prospect theory endeavours to provide a cognitively realistic view of how individual actors approach decision making when faced with possible gains and losses, and the fact that each of these appear to result in preferences for different strategies. Prospect theory consciously breaks the decision making process into two distinct stages: editing and evaluation. Editing is the process of choosing what inputs into the decision making process will be used, while evaluation reflects the actual selection based upon the edited prospects. Prospect theory also involves processes of simplification, where preferences and outcomes are rounded rather than retaining their initial precision, and where extremely unlikely prospects are eliminated. Overall, prospect theory offers a compelling means of integrating many of the previous challenges of decision making, and in particular the criticisms levelled at general utility theory. It explicitly allows for the theory of bounded rationality, recognizing the inherent challenges of making risk-based or ambiguous judgements (Kahneman, 2003a). In addition, it consciously embraces many of the principles of cognitive bias that have been observed in action, but have not been explained by general theories of economic utility (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). The implication is that cognitive decision models in general, and prospect theory in particular, provide a complementary perspective to other views of behavioural decision making.

Behavioural Responses to Structural Limitations. Many of the behavioural decision making theories that have been developed thus far are responses to rational decision making models best typified by expected utility theory. They reflect a decision

maker trying to make the best decisions possible (in other words, to maximize the decision making process) in the face of limitations of information, knowledge, cognition and calculative capacity, and specifically these theories attempt to enumerate those limitations and their impact on the decision making process. A number of alternative decision making models also emerged which consciously rejected the underlying assumptions of both rational and behavioural decision making, and which can perhaps best, or at least generously, be described as "anarchic." The best known of these is the "garbage can model" (Cohen et al., 1972), which was influenced in part by the experiences of March following his assuming the position of dean of a university business school. The major feature of the garbage can model is the uncoupling of problems and choices, and throwing whatever else happens to be around at the time into a can to see what sticks to what. The garbage can model radically expanded on the assertion of Cyert and March (1963) that organizations do not have fully consistent goals; it developed the notion of "loose coupling" among problems, participants, solutions and decisions (Gavetti et al., 2007). A temporal theory of decision making, the garbage can model deliberately rejected the ends-means model that had guided much of decision making.

The mix of garbage in a single can depends on the mix of cans available, on the labels attached to the alternative cans, on what garbage is currently being produced, and on the speed with which garbage is collected and removed from the scene. (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2)

Problems were "resolved" when any particular combination of problem, solution and decision maker interacted with each other in a decision making environment where there was a sufficient level of effort to get something done.

It is clear that the garbage can process does not resolve problems well. But it does enable choices to be made and problems resolved, even when the organization is plagued with goal ambiguity and conflict, with poorly understood problems that wander in and out of the system, with a variable environment, and with decision makers who may have other things on their minds. (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 16)

The garbage can model defines decisions as processes which opportunistically locate problems in proximity to decision makers with enough energy to do something; appropriate solutions were replaced with proximate solutions.

The garbage can model was viewed by some as going too far in its rejection of the essential features of decision making behaviour. While critics recognized that organizations do create problems, successes, threats and opportunities as a justification for their actions, they felt that there was a need to retreat from the full anarchy proposed by the garbage can model. "This backtracking occurs because the garbage can model understates cause-effect attributions, de-emphasizes the activities preceding decisions, and ignores the activities following decisions" (Starbuck, 1983, p. 91). The resulting model by Starbuck took a reverse view of the decision making process, and began with the collective appraisal of a problematic situation in stylized language. The appraisal would continue until collective agreement emerged on a cure; from this, a core problem was generated that the cure would solve, at which point a theory developed relating the problems to the cure, including tests of the theory against past events and concocted examples (Starbuck, 1983). A similarly anarchic perspective also emerged in the writings on decision making of Brunsson (1982; 1986; 1989). In particular, there was a focus on the connection (or disconnection) of decision and action.

One extreme and pathological case of decision making giving no basis for action is decision orientation. This occurs when people regard decision making as their only activities, not caring about the actions and not even presuming that there will be actions. In full accordance with the decision making perspective, these people look upon decisions as end points. (Brunsson, 1982, p. 37)

Conflict and hypocrisy become substitutes for action, particularly in a rational context where criticism is nurtured by a problem orientation and rationalism, while action is nurtured by a solution orientation and irrationality, both of which breed enthusiasm which, with unity, leads to confidence (Brunsson, 1986). Reforms benefit from problems; because ideas may be opposite to the ideas in the last reform, but similar to a previous reform, reforms are facilitated less by learning than forgetfulness, with forgetfulness facilitated in a number of ways, including turnover, changes of top management and the use of consultants (Brunsson, 1989). The anarchic models feel unfamiliar to some in

that they deliberately break the construct of means-ends that has been the hallmark of traditional perspectives since the earliest rational decision making models; what they do provide, however, is other insights into the dynamics of decision making that are particularly encountered in responding to the structural realities and limitations of organizations. Most importantly, they provide alternative perspectives for how decision making processes may be perceived, and how actors may view the dynamics underlying the making of decisions.

Conclusions About Decision Making Development

The range of decision making models extends from rational to behavioural to anarchic. Each has its advantages and appeal: these include the simple uniformity of the rational models, the subjective limitations and interpretation of the behavioural models, and the temporal and collective nature of the anarchic models. Each also has its limitations, however. The rational models are arguably not reflective of actual human decision making behaviour, despite their on-going appeal to economists; the behavioural models, while reflective of behavioural traits, assume a universal decision maker and do not reflect or appreciate the context of a decision; the anarchic models assume context as the primary driver and extrapolate from there. While there are a range of models of decision making that exist within the literature, each of them raises implications for understanding how project initiation decisions are approached.

Considering the decision process associated with project initiation, none of the models discussed above fully offers a relevant framework. The process of initiation for any complex project clearly cannot be considered to be rational; too much is unknown and uncertain about both options and consequences. While the behavioural models consciously reflect the cognitive and capacity limitations inherent in project initiation choices, they do not provide contextual guidance as to how a decision maker would prefer one project over another. The anarchic model, while perhaps appealing in its description of decision making as a random intersection of problems, choices, decision makers and opportunities, removes the means-end focus that is still in part a consideration of evaluating projects. A mid-point would appear to be preferable, and Eisenhardt (1989) would appear to offered one such solution.

A rational versus incremental paradigm has dominated the literature on strategic decision making, with the rational model often cast as a straw man. The results of this research program suggest the limitations of that dichotomy. People are boundedly rational but are also capable of engaging in sensible problem-solving strategies to help compensate for their limitations. (Eisenhardt, 1989a, p. 573)

A sensible middle ground within the literature as articulated would appear to be in part offered through an understanding of the principles of rule following originally articulated by Cyert and March (1992); rule following would appear to offer a middle ground between a purely means-end based presumption of how individual decisions are made and a broader contextual understanding of the forces that influence decision making in organizational contexts.

Exploring Decision Making as Rule Following

The discussion of organizational routines, or decision making as rule following, presents a modification to behavioural decision making models that appears to be a promising middle ground, in that it gives consideration to organizational context and its influences. This concept first emerged in *A Behavioural Theory of the Firm* by Cyert and March (1963/1992). The central principle of rule-following behaviour is that, in addition to the universally bounded nature of rationality, "...behaviours get programmed through spontaneous habits, professional norms, education, training, precedents, traditions, and rituals as well as through formalized procedures" (Starbuck, 1983, p. 93). This section introduces the foundations of organizational routines and rule-following behaviour in a decision making context. It includes a discussion of how rules are developed, the considerations in their use, and how adaptation of rules occurs over time. It concludes with a discussion of the relevance and applicability of rule-following as a model for investigating project initiation decisions.

Foundations of Rule Following

The idea of rule following as a means of guiding decision and choice has its principle foundations in the writings of Max Weber. Weber (1964), writing on the concept of legitimate order, reflected that decision and choice are primarily rule (or 'order') based and reflect the desired conformity of actors. He also acknowledged that multiple—and in fact contradictory—systems could face an actor in a given situation,

and that these could serve to influence how a person orients his action. Rule following in decision making emerged from the introduction of the principles of evolutionary theory to sociology, which endeavoured to develop a theory of the firm that was consistent with both historical analysis and observed patterns of human behaviour (Nelson & Winter, 1973). The application of evolutionary theory was rooted in a behavioural approach, where the essential premise was that a firm operates according to a set of decision rules that link a range of environmental stimuli to a range of responses on the part of firms (Nelson & Winter, 1974). The assumption that firms have decision rules, and that these are in turn retained or replaced through satisficing, provides a basis for both stability and ongoing evolution (Winter, 1971). Rule following therefore respects and reinforces the traditions of behavioural models, while providing a larger contextual appreciation of the influences of the organization on how decisions are ultimately made.

It should be noted that the concept of “evolution” should not be equated with the concept of “development”—in other words, of looking at the growth or transition or transformation of an organization over a period of time. It is not the exploration of the endogenous changes but of the internal genetics which prescribe how external structures develop.

By evolutionary we mean the generation of variety, the transmission or reproduction of rules, and the operation over time of selection and other processes on rule systems. Macro-level structures and population phenomena are shaped by micro-level processes and in turn are the selection environment for micro-level processes. (Burns & Dietz, 1992, p. 260)

An evolutionary view places dynamics at centre stage, and emphasizes the disjunctures that may occur when analyzing change over different time scales (Burns & Dietz, 1992). Echoing Weber, Dietz & Burns (1992) highlight the fact that the complexity of modern life has led to the development of distinct, and at times contradictory, rule systems for each domain of life. The challenge, then, is to understand the evolution of rules within a particular domain, and how this influences the making of decisions in that particular context.

Nelson and Winter (2002) highlighted the degree to which the renaissance in the application of evolutionary theory had made a significant contribution to organizational

understanding, saying that it served as a means of exploring innovation, adopting better routines, and supporting institutional change and economic growth. They also argued that the exploration of organizational routines through the lens of evolutionary theory provided support for understanding how rapid change occurs in the context of bounded rationality “The view of firm behaviour built into evolutionary economic theory fits well with the view of firms contained in modern organization theory, especially the part that shares our own debt to the ‘Carnegie School’” (Nelson & Winter, 2002, p. 42). By the time that the work of the Carnegie School had developed into *A Behavioural Theory of the Firm* (Cyert & March, 1992), the exploration of decision and anticipated consequences was in the foreground of development, where standard operating procedures had become defined as “bundles of decision rules.” In this context, decisions are about cognition – about thoughtful problem solving – even if they are bounded in their rationality; emotions help to determine the value of what decisions may accomplish, and habits govern – or embody – the actions to be triggered (Cohen, 2007b). The result is a theory of decision making that embraces an understanding of the preferences – and limitations – of the individual decision maker, while still respecting and acknowledging the contextual influence of the organization.

A view of decision making as “rule following” was seen to offer distinct advantages over classical, normative economic theory. It provided a natural definition of innovation—as based upon the change of existing decision rules—while redefining the focus of, but not eliminating, the concepts of profit-motivated search and problem-solving behaviour (Nelson & Winter, 1974). Grounded in an understanding of actor-system dynamics, a theory of social rule systems emerged: “We use social rule system theory as a model of our culture as it has proven to be a useful synthetic model in sociology; it is central to new work on institutions; and is closely connected to important work in philosophy on 'language games' as well as recent work on linguistics” (Burns & Dietz, 1992, p. 261). From the perspective of Burns & Dietz (1992), routines are the basis of defining and understanding culture; culture is reflected by the set of rules held by members of an organization, and as a result they both assign meaning and make what is observed interpretable. These rule systems are not necessarily fully congruent, and actors involved in a complex organization must navigate differences in a way that

minimizes incompatibility while enabling them to maintain integrity (Machado & Burns, 1998). Extrapolating to complex organizations and heterogeneous social relationships, organizations are seen as being comprised of multiple overlapping organizing systems, each consisting of its own rules, norms, frame of reality, roles and expectations.

The development of routines is a process of learning. Organizations [...] are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior. The generic term 'routines' includes the forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies, and technologies around which organizations are constructed and through which they operate. (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 320)

Brunsson (1993) observed that such routines were implemented according to written or unwritten rules that required little active mobilization; this also led to challenges in changing or evolving routines. Nelson & Winter (2002) commented on the difficulties and at times irrational resistance to the changing of routines, suggesting that this had two primary causes: the effort and cost associated with changing routines, and—because organizations are coalitions—the potential that changes will create or reopen conflicts within the organization. An important feature of routines is that they are set in an organizational context.

Context dependence is fundamental; the effectiveness of a routine is not measured by what is achieved in principle but by what is achieved in practice; this generally means that the routine might be declared effective in some specific contexts, but perhaps not in others. (Cohen et al., 1996, p. 662)

Lastly, the nature of routines themselves is also important. Cognitive research has provided insights into how routines are employed, at least on a personal level by individual actors, suggesting that they are a product of procedural memory, which is linked to notions of skill, habit and “know-how” (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996). “Routines” therefore represent a memory for how things are done, which is both relatively automatic and inarticulate; this has implications for management and research, in that actors may not be able to fully explain what they do and why (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994). Rules and routines therefore both define the means by which decisions are made and lessons of past experience are integrated, while also

simplifying actions to the level of habitual behaviours that may not be consciously recognized or articulated by individual actors.

Discussion of Rules

The development and use of rules in decision making draws from principles of bounded rationality. Decision making can be costly, and reliance upon simple rules to guide decision making is a form of cost minimization; it results in economies in terms of information collection, computation, and communication, and provides frameworks in which actors throughout the organization are able to perform their roles with greater confidence and certainty (Winter, 1971). The presumption is that these rules do not operate with the intention of deliberately maximizing utility as understood in rational contexts, and that they in fact guide principles of search (whether for information, alternatives or consequences) and satisficing (Nelson & Winter, 1973). Discussions of decision rules require a delineation of the types of rules that are typically encountered in organizations. Early writings made a distinction between institutionalized rules related to formalized institutions, and social rules that were a product of more informal networks of interaction (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Burns & Dietz (1992) defined sets of rules as representing “institutions”: these entities collectively defined the settings or context of interaction, the actors who might take part, and the rules for behaviour of roles within that context or setting; in essence, the notion of “institution” reflects an ideal type for actors within the culture who would adhere to rules in a theoretically optimal manner. Institutions are also reflective of how key values, norms and beliefs within an organization are discussed and referred to by organizational members, whether as means of providing accounts, criticizing or justifying (Machado & Burns, 1998). Shcluter and Theesfield (2010) provided a further semantic clarification of the idea of institutions, distinguishing between strategies, norms (which add prescriptive elements of “must,” “should,” or “may” to a strategy) and rules (which provide for consequences of not adhering). The implication is that rules operate and are operationalized on multiple levels: there is an ideal in the context of the organization, interpretation of that ideal on the part of individual actors, and the actual behaviours that are encountered in decision making scenarios.

An important consideration in the understanding of rules and rule following is their application to the concept of “agency.” Agency tends to assume that social actors have limited room for decision making, autonomy or creativity; actors are “programmed” by the culture, and their ability to operate is limited by these constraints (Burns & Dietz, 1992). Assuming this were true, behaviours would be entirely predictable with sufficient information; at the same time, it would be equally unsatisfactory to assume that agency were completely unpredictable and unlimited.

However strongly actions are patterned by rules, social life is sufficiently complex that some interpretation is required in applying rules to a specific action and interaction context. This interoperation allows some variability in action from individual to individual, and a limited role for agency. (Burns & Dietz, 1992, p. 273)

Dietz and Burns (1992) suggest that there are four criteria to be met in order to attribute agency to a social actor: the actor must be able to make a difference; the actions must be intentional; there must be room for free play on the part of the actor; and the actor must be reflexive. This expands the understanding of rule following to allow for variation in how an individual actor will interpret his or her context, select the appropriate rules and ultimately choose to act.

Developing Rules

The development of rules and the adoption of routinized behaviours can emerge in response to a number of different mechanisms, including in particular: active search for appropriate rules to co-ordinate collective action; passive adaptation to orders and rules issued by an external authority; and internal adoption through imitation, often with a low level of comprehension and conscious awareness (Cohen et al., 1996). The processes by which rules are generated, selected and transmitted influence the cultural environment of the organization; selection processes favour some rules, which leads to their increased prevalence, reflecting reproductive success or cultural fitness (Burns & Dietz, 1992). In a discussion on the use and extension of routines within organizations, Cohen et al. (1996) emphasized that the challenge of understanding the development of rules was in ascertaining how they become embedded in organizations, and in doing so become relatively inaccessible or impervious to change. What is referenced and

reproducible is not the routine itself, but a form of "coded knowledge" reflecting representations, rules and artefacts in various forms and at varying levels of formality. For most organizations, organization routines also involve the legitimation of an asymmetric distribution of power, and therefore understanding them also require an understanding of the political influences and objectives within the organization (Cohen et al., 1996). Rule following would appear to provide a contextual lens to understand project initiation that addresses many of the challenges raised in discussing the project management literature.

Burns and Dietz (1992) argue that when rules are being applied, they must be interpreted in relation to a particular context. This often involves defining, or even socially constructing, the context being considered.

Social actors have scripts in the form of rules, but unlike the stage, the actors are free to engage with each other (and with themselves) in deciding what scene and act, and indeed what characters and what play, to perform. Even when the context is defined, the individual will usually be aware of more than one rule that can be enacted, and thus has some potential for improvisation. (Burns & Dietz, 1992, p. 263)

Burns and Dietz (1992) argue that no situation is totally unambiguous, and therefore there are multiple roles – and multiple rules – that can be operative, and which will thus govern behaviour. This process is not mechanical, but involves interpretation of context and role, and determination of appropriate action. Acting on rules is a particularly important force, and one related to power; actions that implement rules in turn produce responses from other actors and the overall environment, which may in turn cause an actor to modify or discard some rule or set of rules (Dietz & Burns, 1992). The search for rules includes potential access to all of the rules that have been employed within an organization; these rules are searched persistently, although the search may be slow, sporadic or both. Rules that are more familiar or have more recently been used are more likely to be selected. If the search turns up rules that are more profitable than current rules, then they are likely to be adopted (Winter, 1971). Burns and Dietz (1992) argue that the reproductive success of any rule system is measured in terms of its fitness: successful practices will be those that tend to spread, where reproduction

results in a growth in the population adhering to the rules, and the rules are diffused through social networks to other populations who imitate the rules. The evolution or extinction of rules is therefore a product of understanding what works, and particularly an appreciation of what works in a particular context.

Conclusions Regarding Decision Making as Rule Following

The development of organizational routines or rule following behaviours in the context of decision making seems to be an extremely promising framework through which to explore the project initiation decision. As well as drawing on and supporting behavioural models of decision making, as noted by Nelson and Winter (2002), this framework provides a greater contextual understanding in which to explore the dynamics of organizations. In particular, rule systems are explicitly sensitive to context, and are influenced by the objectives, roles, expectations and constraints that are operative within organizations. They recognize, and are developed in response to, the power dynamics of the organization. In employing rule systems, actors are expected to have a level of agency, where there is flexibility in interpretation of context, role, action and decision, and multiple possible choices to a decision are assumed. The evolution of rule systems is itself the product of reflexive thinking and learning. In considering the application of employing decision making as rule following in exploring project initiation decisions, it will be necessary to understand the empirical results that have emerged from research to date, and what this suggests in devising a research approach.

Challenges in Current Approaches

Studying decision making empirically is a challenging undertaking, as evidenced by the literature. Learning from these challenges is critical to the development of an investigative strategy that can enhance an understanding of how initiation decisions are made, while still considering the findings of earlier investigations. This section explores some of the research challenges that have been particularly highlighted in the literature. It discusses fundamental questions related to levels of analysis and organizational issues. In addition, the section highlights a number of specific dimensions raised by empirical decision making studies that relate to the exploration of project initiation decisions, these being:

- process dimensions

- social interaction and alignment
- personal power and authority
- management of change
- clarity of results
- determination of value

This section concludes with a summary of the issues to be considered and the next steps that must be explored.

Levels of Analysis in Decision Making

One of the fundamental issues in research, and one where there is great variation in the literature related to decision making, is determining the appropriate level of analysis. Potential targets for study include the individual decision maker, groups, organizations and the decisions themselves. Where conscious and explicit recommendations have been made, a number of researchers suggest that the most appropriate unit of analysis is the decision maker (Brunsson, 1982; Cohen et al., 1996; Eisenhardt, 1989a; March, 1972; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Nutt, 1984b). Cohen et al. (1996) specifically recommend focussing on the individual in decision making routines. March (1972) suggests “...the idea that humans make choices has proven robust enough to become a major matter of faith” (March, 1972, p. 417). Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that a valuable focus of further study is on how individual decision makers overcome anxiety and gain the confidence to decide, including an explanation of how they overcome procrastination, especially when information is limited. While *Administrative behavior: A study of decision-making processes in administrative organizations* (Simon, 1947/1997) discusses decision making in organizations, it takes as its focus the decision itself. Conversely, Cyert and March (1956) explicitly focus on organizations and decision making systems. From the perspective of Gavetti et al. (2007), one of the cardinal precepts on which the Carnegie School was founded was that of “...organizations as the ultimate unit of study” (2007, p. 523). A final contribution in regard to appropriate levels of analysis is a delightfully qualified “it depends”:

More specifically, a firm that is highly centralized is likely to have a strategic decision process that is best understood by using an individual unit of analysis, while an organizational perspective sheds light on the same process in a firm that

is dominated by formalization. In contrast, the small group, with all its socio-political phenomena, is the basic unit of analysis for understanding the strategic process in an organization whose dominant dimension is complexity.

(Fredrickson, 1986, pp. 294-295)

Deciding upon an appropriate unit of analysis for a study is essential, but is a consideration for which there is little guidance and much conflicting opinion.

Organizational Issues in Decision Making

In exploring decision making in an organizational context, the influence of structure has been identified as being of particular importance. There is a growing body of literature suggesting that organizational structure has an influence on an organization's strategic decision process, and ultimately its strategy (Fredrickson, 1986). In particular, because the structure of an organization imposes boundaries on the rationality of its members, the degree of complexity of the organizational structure determines how narrow or broad those boundaries will be. Centralization as a particular form of structure also has been observed to have a significant influence on decision making approaches. In a centralized organization, the goals of executive team members will guide decision making to a much greater degree than in other structures; executive team members will also exhibit greater commitment to their own goals, even where those are most broadly stated as survival within the organization (Fredrickson, 1984b). Fredrickson also suggests that there are finite limits to the level of diversity of goals amongst coalition members that can exist in a centralized structure (1986). The degree to which structures are centralized or decentralized will therefore appear to be of significance in understanding decision making.

Process Dimensions of Decision Making

The literature includes extensive discussion of process considerations regarding decision making in organizations. According to Mintzberg (1976, p. 250)

...a strategic decision process is characterized by novelty, complexity, and open-endedness, by the fact that the organization usually begins with little understanding of the decision situation it faces or the route to its solution, and only a vague idea of what that solution might be and how it will be evaluated when it is developed.

In an early exploration into decision making in relation to the initiation of strategic projects, Mintzberg's research adopted an emergent approach for identifying the process employed by organizations. Key findings were: there was considerable evidence that search was step-wise and hierarchical, as suggested in theories of bounded rationality; the routine of evaluation-choice which dominates discussions in the literature has far less impact in observed behaviours; and some of the greatest difficulties arrive at the point of authorization (rather than choice) when attention and expertise are limited, and choices are ultimately made by people who often do not fully comprehend the proposals put in front of them. Overall, there was no steady progression through steps in decision routines, but instead the process was shown to be a dynamic open system. As well, while the most important routines were identified as diagnosis, design and bargaining, it was suggested that little continues to be known about these routines.

Later work in exploring the process of decision making is reflected in the work of Nutt (1984a; 1984b; 1986; 1989; 1992a; 1992b; 1993b; 1993c), whose investigations acknowledged and expanded on the early investigations of Mintzberg et al. (1976). In order to support a larger assessment of projects, Nutt imposed a model of decision making on the research that reflected activities of formulation, concept development, detailing, evaluation and implementation; on these activities were superimposed steps of search, synthesis and analysis. Key findings included the conclusion that five essential types of process were employed in the development of solutions: the implementation of historical models; adoption of off-the-shelf solutions; appraisal in response to ideas with unknown values; search in response to needs that lack workable ideas; and *nova* – the attempt to create truly innovative solutions (Nutt, 1984b). Nutt's additional findings included observations that aligned with the garbage can model, in which new technology or good ideas resulted in: the search for problems; a failure to observe any process that relates to normative methods; a dominant focus on establishing solutions and moving towards actions quickly in the majority of decisions studies; and premature commitment to action that is strongly rooted in the behaviour of executives.

Process observations also relate to the documents and artefacts that are produced as a result of the decision making process. Simon (1955) observed that existing processes create limitations and constraints on how strategies are developed and decisions are made. An example of a budget is presented, which serves as both a management control device and a vehicle for developing predictions and making commitments; in this context, a budget can be seen as performing several roles: it is a prediction of future cash flows; it is a schedule specifying intermediate steps to anticipated outcomes; it is a theory advancing relationships between concepts (e.g., costs and sales); and it is a precedent, in that it establishes predictions for one year which becomes *prima facie* evidence for future years. March (1972), however, noted that such documents are often more appropriately used retrospectively as an interpretation of past decisions than they are as a predictor for future ones.

A number of observations have been made regarding the extent of the “formality” of decision making processes, describing the rigour and detail by which decision making processes are defined. Most studies of the decision making process have produced either “focussed” observations of one stage, or a very rich but “loose” description of the entire process (Fredrickson, 1986). Both types of studies have found that where formalized processes have been employed, the likelihood of strategic processes being motivated by reactive rather than proactive behaviours increases (Fredrickson, 1984b). Actual observations of processes being applied may themselves be oversimplified, as executives have been found to think and act simultaneously (Fredrickson, 1985). Executives are seen to be most effective by combining rational, analytical techniques with intuition; as a result, the decisions that are produced are comprehensive in some ways and not in others (Eisenhardt, 1989a; Fredrickson, 1985). The appropriate level of formality in the strategic decision process has been a point of significant concern, where problems emerge if the process is either too comprehensive or not comprehensive enough; in reality, however, inertia and familiarity play a strong role in keeping processes stable with minimal changes regardless of appropriateness or relevance (Fredrickson & Iaquinto, 1989). Finally, context has emerged as an essential principle in the appropriate use of process; while there is a tendency towards the adoption of low-effort and expedited tactics by executives, appropriateness is contextual, and more

complex and formal tactics are often more appropriate (Nutt, 1993c). The implication is that there is a tension in decision making in terms of how "bounded" decision makers can actually be, and how deep an understanding and appreciation of context is required by individual decision makers.

Extensive investigation of the role of formal analysis in strategic decision making has been conducted by Langley (1989; 1990; 1991; 1995). Formal analysis is viewed as being increasingly important the more that decision-making power is shared between people who do not quite trust each other; formal analysis and the process of social interaction are closely intertwined, with formal analysis being carried out within specific social contexts (Langley, 1989). Langley (1990) observed the primary role of formal analysis as a substantive input to decisions in controlling implementation and as a key tool of persuasion and verification within the negotiation process; it was seen to be unproductive when it is used to put forward contradictory positions and gain time in an atmosphere of indecision and divergence. It was noted that formal analysis was seldom used to explore problems, but tended more to allow people to coalesce around the concept of an "organizational decision" (Langley, 1991). Finally, Langley (1995) highlighted instances where excessive formal analysis was relied upon (where there was an underlying lack of trust at different levels; in the face of horizontal conflict with little vertical certainty or decisiveness; and where wide ranging mandates for study lacked any sense of immediacy or objective) and where insufficient analysis occurred (where dominant leaders made arbitrary decisions; individuals lower in the hierarchy were powerful enough to do what they wanted; and unanimity led to groupthink and a failure to objectively evaluate options). The larger implication of Langley's work would appear to echo the suggestion of Flyvbjerg (1998) that rationality is the last resort of the powerless.

Social Interaction and Alignment Issues in Decision Making

One of the most significant and influential aspects of strategic decision making is related to ensuring social interaction and alignment. At its essence, decision making is a collaborative process. An important emphasis in decision making is the recognition of the complementary roles of persuasion and evocation in encouraging a decision. When there is a desire to ensure an action is carried out, the mechanism of evocation is

critical in ensuring support; evoking and attention-directing processes have a significant influence on organizational decision making (Simon, 1965). Social influence is also seen to impact decision outcomes in the presence of uncertainty that otherwise cannot be resolved, particularly where outcomes are consequential and resources are scarce (Pfeffer, Salancik, & Leblebici, 1976). It has been suggested that establishing coalescence within groups requires legitimization of the group leader (Nutt, 1976). Given that it is seldom that any one individual controls the process of decision making from end to end, or can comprehend all of the information necessary to make strategic decisions, there is also a requirement for participation from people with a broad range of expertise at numerous levels in the organization (Fredrickson, 1984b; Fredrickson, 1986). This creates challenges in establishing commitment collectively within the organization; rather than there being a point of decision where consensus emerges, agreement may unfold gradually and subtly (Mintzberg et al., 1990). Clearly, even where leadership should be expected to affect and provide clarity to the decision making process, the influences may be much more diffuse.

Establishing a basis for collective alignment can also be affected by incompatibilities with formalized structure. Machado and Burns (1998) have suggested that the presence of hierarchy, fixed rules, standardization and formalization have been observed to be incongruent with social networks that stress flexibility and openness. The identification of interests that are in alignment with the broader objectives of the organization can address this issue; at the same time, it is important to recognize that underlying this strategy is a reality that states that actors are pursuing a common enterprise as well as individually competing for material and intangible rewards (Burns, 1961). Political activities are also a means of clarifying the power relationships within an organization, and can bring about consensus regarding decision and mobilization of actions (Mintzberg et al., 1976). In the face of increased complexity, actors are more likely to engage in task specialization and have more difficulty in agreeing on goals (Fredrickson, 1986). At the same time, where political coalitions do emerge there is a tendency for them to be stable; alliances tend to endure and allies tend to be constant even as issues change (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). An inherent danger of politics is the tendency for powerful decision makers to impose their ideas on the decision

process, and this is accompanied by a tendency to prefer simple, responsive and decisive actions (Nutt, 1993b). It appears that even where decision rules are supposed to encompass contextual considerations, political alliances may favour consistent and at times contrary responses.

A more coercive form of politics is that associated with manipulation. A key form of manipulation is justification; actions may be justified unintentionally because actors involuntarily alter current beliefs to reflect new information. Actions are justified through the identification of problems, threats, successes or opportunities (Langley et al., 1995). This is a particular challenge where there are several decision makers and several actors, which is typical of organizations; differences between private thoughts and public expressions give rise to misunderstandings, resulting in conflicts, escalation and challenges in establishing effective resolutions (Brunsson, 1982). Where resolution is complicated or not desired, organizations also consciously choose to create inconsistencies between talk, decisions and work products, and also consciously use hypocrisy and ambiguity as a means of managing divergent expectations (Brunsson, 1986). Particular challenges emerge when actors and decision makers have divergent views on appropriate courses of action; where actors control the opinions of decision makers, executive will come to see actors acting in accordance with the views that they have come to see as their own (Brunsson, 1993). Not only can political coalitions institute conformity in decision making, but actors who have disproportionate influence on decision makers can also potentially manipulate the conclusions of these coalitions.

Personal Power and Authority Issues in Decision Making

Also significant in strategic decision making is the exercise of personal power and authority by the decision maker. It has been argued that power is an essential construct to rationality—because rationality is contextually situated, and because power reflects that capacity to make a difference in existing conditions in a way that is meaningful for other actors (Clegg, 2006). Personal power and authority are often measured by the influence that actors have within the organization. This observation recognizes that decision makers are required to do more than simply make decisions; they must take action on decisions and get things done, acting as well as inducing

others to act (Brunsson, 1982). In much of the early literature, this perspective was not observed.

The writings of Simon and March, as well as much of the rest of cognitive psychology and organization theory, have portrayed the decision maker as passive, a receptacle to whom things happen: problems arise, opportunities appear, choices are forced, interruptions occur. (Langley et al., 1995)

What has been missing, argue Langley et al. (1995), is inspiration; the most effective decision makers are personally inspired, and their actions in turn inspire the behaviour of others. As discussed above, however, there is a fine line between channelling inspiration and engaging in manipulation.

A number of additional personal qualities are required of strategic decision makers if they are to be effective and fully occupy their role. Decision makers must maintain a balance between rationality and humility; they should have a playful attitude toward their own beliefs, the logic of consistency and the way they see things being connected to the world (March, 1972). Decision makers need responsibility, which is itself a result of credibility through having affected previous events; in turn, this responsibility may legitimize actions, where decision makers with a high level of personal or role legitimacy provide actions with legitimacy (Brunsson, 1990). The decision styles of decision makers—their personality and underlying preferences—have also been observed to have an influence on decision making, with a more flexible style giving access to several modes of understanding (Nutt, 1993a). Decision makers also are seen to exercise “agency”, meaning that actors within a rule system have a degree of room for autonomy, creativity and freedom of response in a given rule situation (Dietz & Burns, 1992). Finally, there is the motivation of self interest; in a world of self-interested decision makers nested within organizations, decision makers must have a clear sense of their personal objectives as they evaluate alternatives and expected consequences (March, 1987). The on-going challenge in exploring decisions as rule following is the degree to which decisions are influenced by the goals of the individual rather than the objectives of the organization.

Clarity of Results Issues in Decision Making

Ultimately, decisions must lead to action. An essential question associated with strategic decision making is the extent to which action is a *result* of decision. There is a clear indication of bias at executive levels towards an immediate and early focus on action, at times before a full appreciation of the problem or analysis of appropriate opportunities has occurred (Nutt, 1993a). Critical to decision making is the appropriate definition of the problem and scoping of the solution that will result (Nutt, 1984b). The commitment to take action is separate from the making of the decision. While there can be decision without actions, and actions without decisions, instilling an action perspective in a decision making situation is crucial to the attainments of results; it is suggested that this requires the development of extreme motivations and commitments, with strong efforts to complete the action in spite of difficulties and uncertainty (Brunsson, 1982). Ideas may develop differently in contexts where ideas are important as opposed to contexts where action is important. Ideas may arise and change and disappear more quickly than actions. Decisions can play a role in converting debate to requirements for action (Brunsson, 1993). Formulation—the steps taken by a decision maker to establish directions and guide subsequent activities—plays a role in ensuring commitment to action; reframing in particular has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy in clarifying need and creating a bias and emphasis on action (Nutt, 1992a). Note that regardless of the degree to which the link between decision and action is evident, proceeding to action is critical.

Ensuring clarity of results implies that decision makers must have a tolerance for ambiguity along with a bias towards action. Decision making has been described as a recursive, discontinuous process involving a host of dynamic factors, where almost nothing is a given or easily determined (Mintzberg et al., 1976). The relationship between decision and action can be tenuous, creating a lack of clarity regarding when and at what point a decision has actually occurred (Mintzberg et al., 1990). Commitment need not precede action, or whatever commitment does precede action may be vague and confusing (Langley et al., 1995). In the face of this ambiguity, decision makers are often tempted to seek prescriptive recommendations from outside as a means of creating clarity—if at least for themselves—while the most appropriate forms of advice

may be related to understanding available alternatives (Dalal & Bonaccio, 2010). Ambiguity has the potential to derail commitments towards action; a tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness on the part of actors to make a decision in the face of ambiguity, would therefore seem to be essential.

Value Determination Issues in Decision Making

Strategic decision making must result in value, and decision makers must therefore have clarity of objectives in determining appropriate choices. Objectives do not always have the same relative value, and those that may be seen as important in one circumstance may appear to be less important in another; to the extent that means and ends are important, objectives must be agreed upon, reconcilable and stable (Lindblom, 1959). The problems of ambiguity are partly problems of disagreement about goals among individuals; more conspicuously they are problems of relevance, priority and clarity of goals at individual and organizational levels (March, 1978a). The issue is complicated by the fact that different decision processes are often employed in the face of problems than in the face of opportunities; this is a product of perceived relative position of the decision maker, and—as implied by prospect theory—a higher risk appetite in the face of loss (Fredrickson, 1985). Finally, determination of value requires recognition that objectives may be both tangible and intangible. There is a tendency for tangible goals to be overemphasized in comparison with intangible goals which—while considered important—may be discounted or ignored by decision makers (Cyert et al., 1956). Clarity regarding desired value is a critical consideration in appropriately weighing options, and delineating between individual and organizational objectives in making decisions.

Conclusion

In exploring strategic decision making—and in particular the project initiation choices that are the focus of our investigation—there is a need to understand the role of the project shaper (as introduced and discussed in Chapter 2) as the initial decision maker who identifies, advocates for and supports the initiation of strategic project opportunities (Smith & Winter, 2010). This exploration requires an understanding of the role of project shapers, and of the expectations, challenges and pressures that they face in performing their role. Like project management, traditional views of decision

making tend to emphasize rational and normative approaches, which have been criticized for not reflecting how decisions are actually made. Behavioural decision making models—and particularly those involving decision making by rule following—seem particularly well suited to understanding the dynamics of the decision maker as actor, the forces that shape and influence the role of decision maker, and the context in which decision making occurs. These models provide a framework for the exploration of the politics, structures, policies and social frameworks in which decision making occurs, and how these are transformed into roles, rules and expectations.

A number of dimensions have provided insight into how decisions are made. Rational models of decision making are arguably not reflective of human decision making behaviour, despite their enduring appeal to economists. Behavioural models provide sensitivity to human influences, but assume a universal decision maker and tend to be less influenced by issues of structure, politics and context. Anarchic models move beyond the means-ends construct typical of most models, and explicitly explore issues of structure and context. A mid-point would be optimal, one that gives consideration to behaviours, the integration of means and ends, and the understanding of politics, structure and context. Arriving at this understanding requires an understanding not just of the results of decisions, but of the underlying process by which decisions are formed. From a process perspective, this includes examining the degree of formality and structure of processes within the organization. In a social and political context, the interactions at work and the personal power and authority of the decision maker must be considered. In the context of the decision and resulting solution, there must be an appreciation of the management of change, the clarity of results to be realized and the value and ultimate objectives that are actually being sought.

Decision making as rule following appears to provide a useful perspective in integrating the multiple perspectives of this field. Rule following provides an understanding of the principles of behavioural models, while providing a larger contextual appreciation for the influences of the organization in how decisions are made. This perspective explores the rules that are employed in a given context, as well as the dynamics of how rules are formed and evolve over time. Rule systems explicitly explore the interaction of actor and system, recognizing that while rules provide an ideal

approach to decision making, individual actors have a range of roles in which they may perceive themselves in a given situation, and may employ a variety of potential responses. This consideration gives rise to an explicit understanding of agency, and the autonomy, flexibility and influence that the actor has within the decision making context. Decision making as rule following explicitly situates the human actor in the context of the organization, its culture and its rules, while recognizing that the actor still has choice in how he or she responds and acts within the rule system.

A viable strategy for better understanding how project decisions are made appears to be to integrate an understanding of rule following behaviour that addresses these dimensions with the initial conceptual model proposed by Smith & Winter (2010) regarding the craft of project shaping. Rule following, and the theory of social rule systems, provide a potential theoretical foundation exploring a theory of project initiation decision making, and a means of testing the validity of the proposed dimensions. The next chapter will outline the conceptual model and hypotheses for this study, as well as the methodological approach to be adopted in investigating these questions.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

A significant challenge in undertaking the current research was devising an appropriate strategy of inquiry to address the research questions I wished to explore. There is a broad literature of decision making, and research in the field has historically employed and advocated for a variety of techniques, approaches and strategies of methodology. In initially defining the research questions that resulted from the literature review, I endeavoured to establish a clear focus and purpose to the study that sought to examine the roles of individuals within the process of project initiation:

- What is the role of power, personality and rules in the process of project initiation?
- How do executives perceive their roles and the rules associated with those roles, and how do individual differences influence their approach to decision making?

Yet even within these questions, which restrict what is addressed within this study to the process of project initiation, and particularly the roles that individuals play within this process, there were numerous potential research opportunities and possible investigative strategies. The original focus of the research questions assumed that the constructs of power, personality and rules were of equal stature and represented broadly similar levels of emphasis, a presumption that emerged from the literature in which they were first identified. As well, originally the spotlight of the study was entirely on the actor-participants; it sought to understand how they perceived their roles, and to explore the influences that had ultimately led to these perceptions. While this approach seemed promising, and likely to result in useful and relevant insights, the actually findings of the study led to a reshaping of the research focus.

In adopting a grounded theory approach, the objective is to develop theory that is grounded in the data, and more importantly the core category and concepts, that emerge from the study. This means that theory does not appear at the beginning of the study as a proposed conceptual model, but actually arises at the conclusion as a reflection of the practical implications of the categories, concepts and process relationships that have emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998). The analysis of the data resulting from this study revealed that very different conceptual implications

were emerging than had been anticipated at the outset. Firstly, the constructs of power, personality and rules—while present—arose at very different conceptual levels than had been anticipated, with various implications that had impact on the results. Secondly, while the results provided perceptions that went beyond the roles of participants, and led to an awareness that process, rule and decision effectiveness had much larger implications than originally envisioned. Finally, the concept of agency—originally viewed as a tangential offshoot of the larger exploration of rules—emerged within the study as a central and important concept. As a result, the direction of this study, and in particular the research questions at the focus of the analysis, shifted. While the overall focus of the study retained its intent and purpose, the specific questions that it sought to answer evolved. Ultimately, the research questions this study sought to address in conducting the analysis were as follows:

- How do individuals perceive the process of project initiation?
- What influences these perceptions?
- What are the perceived influences on decision making process effectiveness?
- How do personal and structural influences shape the making of effective project initiation decisions?

This chapter provides an overview of the investigative strategy and research methods that I employed in conducting this study. The first section provides a rationale for the investigative strategy that I adopted, based upon a discussion of strategies used historically to investigating decision making. The second section provides the justification for adopting a qualitative approach, and in particular of the choice of grounded theory as a methodology. The third section describes the research design, including the approaches I took in sampling, data collection and analysis, as well as approaches in addressing ethical considerations. The final section provides a discussion of the validation approach for the study.

Historical Investigative Strategies

There have been numerous discussions in the literature of appropriate strategies for investigating the process of decision making within organizations. The complication associated with research into decision making is four-fold, in that it is not always clear: what a decision is (Mintzberg et al., 1976); when a decision occurs (Simon, 1965); the

process involved in decision making (Nutt, 1984b); and whether a decision is even recognized as having been made (Langley et al., 1995). Because the concept of "decision" is in many ways an artificial construct, any investigation relating to it has the challenge of imputing what occurs, and how it occurs, even where there may be no evidence that the event exists at all. In part to explore these issues, this section introduces critiques from the literature, and then presents the strategy I adopted and the assumptions that I made in conducting this study.

There have been a number of critiques of investigative strategies associated with increasing our understanding of the decision making process. Early studies attempted to evaluate the process by making extensive use of simulations and laboratory experiments to replicate the conditions and environment within which decisions are made (Simon, 1965). The validity of laboratory research has been challenged, by those who believe that it places as much emphasis on group interaction as it does on the decision making process (Mintzberg et al., 1976). Attempts to analyze previous actual decisions have also been found to be susceptible to distortions involving such issues as lapses of memory regarding events, sequence and other salient details (Mintzberg et al., 1976). While field studies offer the promise of observing actual decision making processes in real-world environments, they also create significant challenges for the researcher in terms of time requirements, access and the ability to observe all of the interactions and events that lead to a decision (Cohen et al., 1996). The methods associated with having research participants externalize their internal processes through "talking aloud" protocols have also been denounced, with critics suggesting that participants may not be consciously aware of many of their actions, which limits their ability to articulate what they do and why (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994). The consequence for the researcher is that although several paths seem promising, each has arguments and criticisms regarding its use, and the challenge remains the same: surmising action, purpose and meaning out of internal activities that are related to a conceptual construct.

Investigation of rule systems introduces its own challenges. The environment in which rules operate, as defined by Burns and Dietz (1992), involves an articulation of the settings, the roles, the actors who may take part, and the rules available to the actors within those roles. Understanding rule systems and their application requires

being aware of the context in which the rules occur, the opportunity for agency and action within that context, and the degree to which there is opportunity for manipulation of the rules by the actors (Burns & Dietz, 1992; Dietz & Burns, 1992). There is also a need to clearly delineate the routines or actions of the actors and the underlying rule systems from which those routines are drawn (Cohen et al., 1996).

If we assume as a starting point that routinized behaviours can be rule-based, we must carefully distinguish between the sequence of collective actions realized over time, and the set of rules which generate this sequence when applied by a team of individuals. (Cohen et al., 1996, p. 687)

This implies that even the initiation of projects may in some ways be routinized, but also that routines are in fact modified by individuals actors involved in discrete decisions. It is necessary to separate the rule system as an “ideal” from the actions which are taken in the context of that rule system, and also to understand the influence and agency of the individual decision maker—and the corresponding motivations—in choosing, applying and adapting defined rules.

Finally, the unit of analysis to be used in the research must be determined. Social rule systems theory is itself a particularization of actor-systems theory, and draws on the conceptual theory of structuration as defined by Anthony Giddens (Burns & Dietz, 1992; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Levitt & March, 1988; Machado & Burns, 1998). One potential level of analysis is that of the organization, or at least the “structure”; this option provides opportunities to explore system relationships within and between organizations (Machado & Burns, 1998), rules as means of establishing organizational legitimacy (Zhou, 1993), and ecologies of learning (Levitt & March, 1988), to name just three. At the other end of the spectrum—which also includes structural analysis and the analysis of individual events—is the option to focus on the actors: how they interpret their roles within the rule system within which they operate, and how they choose to enact those roles (Burns & Dietz, 1992; Dietz & Burns, 1992; Dietz, Burns, & Buttel, 1990). Emphasis on the actor reinforces Giddens’ (1993) delineation of the person that is making the action, the “acting self.” This places the research emphasis on understanding the microprocesses at the level of individual actors, rather than at that of the overall population (Dietz et al., 1990). In researching decision making and rule

systems, therefore, a spectrum of potential units of analysis may be applied. Decisions and rule systems can be examined through units of analysis that include the organization, structure, role, actor or individual event; the choice of which unit of analysis is appropriate is therefore a critical choice in the research design.

Given my increasing appreciation of the considerations associated with investigating the influence of individuals on the rule systems associated with project initiation—and the implications and consequences of those considerations—I could have adopted a number of investigative approaches and lines of inquiry in conducting this study. After reflecting closely on the focus and intent underlying my research questions, I ultimately made decisions regarding the three crucial aspects of the methodology to be used:

- Investigative approach. While I considered case studies and *in situ* explorations of actual decisions as they are being made as offering the most realistic insight into actual decision making behaviours, complications of time, access, and the often protracted nature of the strategic decisions that I was seeking to investigate precluded this strategy. As well, there would have been the added complication of finding organizations and participants that were undertaking similar decisions of comparable strategic complexity in the same time period. As a result, the option with which I chose to proceed was the development of a strategic decision making scenario that would be broadly relevant to participants, and that all participants would review and discuss. This approach provided comparability across organizations by identifying a strategically important project that would require significant consideration and discussion, in whatever form that occurred within the subject organizations. Participants would describe how the initiation decision for a project like the one described would be arrived at within their organizations, and particularly how they would approach becoming the stewards of such an opportunity to the point of the initiation decision. While this does raise some of the concerns of “talking aloud” protocols discussed by Cohen (1994), the research design attempted to compensate for this by augmenting data collection by means of a subsequent exploration of details regarding the initiation process

and rule system within the organization, and the roles and approach adopted by participants as actors within that rule system.

- Exploration of the rule system. A distinction between the rule systems and the actual behaviours and practices of actors (the routines) was established by designing the research approach to consciously address and inquire about both. The decision making scenario provided an opportunity to observe the described approach and intent of the actor in operating within the rule system, and subsequent questions specifically focussed on and explored the rule system itself as a separate and distinct concept within the organization.
- Unit of analysis. The unit of analysis chosen for this study was the individual actors. This allowed the study to include their observations of the organization, the rule systems and their roles within that rule system. Through the adoption of a common decision making scenario, comparisons would then be possible within and across cases regarding how the scenario would be perceived by these individuals, what processes and rule systems would be relevant, and how the actors would perceive and approach their roles.

The decision making scenario developed for this study is included in Appendix A. It was specifically designed with three goals in mind: 1) to be universally relevant to all participants; 2) to be strategically important enough that the process for attaining an initiation decision would be based upon as comprehensive and rigorous an approach as possible within the organization; and 3) to have an impact within the organization that was broad enough that the effect on organizational politics, communications and stakeholders would be of significant consideration. Participants were presented with a scenario in which their organization was under considerable pressure from the board of directors to enhance productivity and efficiency. It indicated that one of the results of a consulting study to evaluate current operations and identify potential gaps was a proposal to consider the implementation of an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) initiative. In the scenario, the information regarding the potential initiative was very high level, limited to a paragraph in a consulting report. In developing the scenario, I drew on my experience in developing similar tools for instructional and research purposes, as well as my familiarity with the type of project under consideration. The design included

balancing the scenario to make it specific enough to be realistic, while being sufficiently high-level that its plausibility within a number of different organizations could be inferred. The resulting scenario was reviewed with five colleagues in order to obtain feedback regarding relevance, and to address any aspects that may have been insufficiently defined. The description provides an introduction to the scenario, and is structured in two parts. The first part explores the process of initiation organizationally, without yet presuming involvement of the participant as actor, and is designed to get the participants to identify the relevant processes associated with initiation decisions of the scale and complexity of the scenario provided. The second part situates the actor within the scenario, and explores how he or she would approach his or her role in supporting initiation of such a project. Through exploring participant responses, the scenario is designed to increase understanding of how such a project would be initiated, the degree to which the role of project shaper would exist in such an initiation process, and how the participant would approach the project shaper role.

Qualitative Justification

This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is an interpretive approach to investigation that endeavours to study phenomena and activities in their natural settings, and to interpret those phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It is a process of inquiry that is designed to explore social and human problems based upon distinct methodological traditions of inquiry (Creswell, 1998). In an article that predated and presaged the development of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1965) advanced qualitative research as being a vehicle for the development of substantive theory, and a research approach that inherently blended implicit coding, data collection and analysis as integrated and intertwined concepts. Qualitative research explores the lived experience of participants and enables exploration of how meanings are formed through and within culture (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Given the exploratory nature of many of the questions that resulted from the initial literature review supporting this study, I naturally turned to qualitative inquiry as a means of investigating the research questions, as I wanted to examine participant perceptions of context, process and problems in their experience of project initiation. This section outlines the rationale for the adoption of grounded theory as a

choice of method, the essential strategies chosen with the methodology of grounded theory, and an exploration of the biases and influences that I bring to the process of conducting the study.

Choice of Method

It would have been feasible for me to adopt any one of several methodological approaches in conducting this study. Particular traditions of inquiry that I considered in contemplating the study design were phenomenology, case study research and grounded theory. The considerations associated with each option are:

- **Phenomenology** emphasizes a desire to understand the essential structure or essence of a phenomenon. It develops an understanding of the perceived meaning of the topic under study by exploring the core dimensions and concepts of the phenomenon, as perceived by participants (Creswell, 1998). Approaching this study from a phenomenological perspective would have involved identifying and exploring the essential concepts of project initiation, how they are perceived in the context of participant organizations, and the implications they have for the study participants. This would have resulted in a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of influence by which project initiation is shaped and perceived, and how these dimensions serve to create relevance and meaning as overall concepts. While this was certainly a viable strategy, and one I sincerely considered, my ambitions for the study were somewhat larger; my ultimate desire was to be able to move beyond understanding the concepts and structures themselves, to advance a broader theory of the phenomenon of project initiation;
- **Case study research** emphasizes the exploration of a case or cases in the context of a bounded system over time. Typically case study research draws on multiple sources of information, and uses both within-case and cross-case analysis to establish meaning and context (Creswell, 1998). Adopting a case study approach would have involved comprehensive inquiries of project initiation as a bounded system within organizations. If I were to have adopted this particular approach, however, it would likely have been tempting to shift the unit of analysis from the individual to that of the organization. This would have had some positive implications, as multiple participants in an organization would be

involved, providing a greater level of triangulation of perceptions of the process within individual organizations. The potential drawback, as Creswell (1998) notes, is that there is an inverse relationship between number of cases and the ultimate quality and comprehensiveness of the study results. Attaining the level of depth of understanding that I sought would have likely limited the scope of the study to no more than three to five cases, potentially constraining the relevance and applicability of the study results;

- **Grounded theory** is an investigative approach whose primary focus is the development of theory through the exploration of why and how concepts relate to a particular phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 1998). It is a means of understanding the inherent complexity associated with the phenomenon, and supporting the development of meaning and relevance through conceptual exploration of context and participant experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I was attracted to the adoption of grounded theory as an approach for the study because of its emphasis on the creation of theory. It was a particularly appealing mode of inquiry because of my desire to not just explore the concepts and dimensions associated with the phenomenon, but also to develop meaning through the articulation and advancement of theory that would be relevant and understandable by study participants and practitioners.

It is probably also worthwhile adding a note regarding the use (or non-use) of critical theory in the conduct of this study. In literature I reviewed, particularly the project management literature, I noted that many sources called for increased adoption of critical research methods in order to understand the lived experiences of research participants. Critical research is a philosophical stance, rather than a methodological one, although it does favour certain methodological traditions (Creswell, 1998). As mentioned by Creswell (1998), a fundamental purpose of critical theory is the identification (and possibly the transformation) of ideological perspectives within the environment that is being studied. At this stage, my purpose was not to transform, but rather to understand the levers of change, and to develop theory with this study; it was my intent to explore the influences that do exist within the initiation process, particularly

personal influences, motivations, impacts and meanings. While the resulting insights and theory may lead to subsequent transformative efforts on the part of participants and practitioners, such initiatives did not form part of this study.

Approach to Grounded Theory

The purpose of developing grounded theory was to provide a sociological method that occupied a middle ground between the “subjective,” “impressionistic” research methods by which qualitative research was often judged, and the then-dominant emphasis on quantitative theory verification (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999). Grounded theory is a means of exploring not only problematic but also routine events by understanding the contingencies, process and complexities of phenomena experienced by participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the years since the initial development of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967/1999), several interpretations have emerged regarding how grounded theory studies are (and should be) conducted (Creswell, 1998). As well as there being different forms of grounded theory, the clear definition of this approach is often further obscured by tendencies on the part of researchers to blur, adapt and borrow concepts of grounded theory rather than maintaining allegiance to the theory as a methodological whole (Breckenridge, Jones, Elliott, & Nicol, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 2010; Suddaby, 2006). This study specifically adopts a Straussian interpretation of grounded theory, as reflected in the work of Strauss and Corbin (2008). The study’s approach—as further detailed in the next section—was predominantly guided by their work, although additional resources were also referenced where appropriate (see, for example, Breckenridge et al., 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2009; Glaser, 2010; Glaser, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1965; Suddaby, 2006).

In addition to adopting a Straussian stance, I approached this study with an intention to support the development of substantive theory. The term “substantive theory” was initially coined by Glaser and Strauss (1965), and implied the formulation of concepts into a set of hypotheses that were relevant and applicable to a particular substantive area of study. Corbin & Strauss (2008) differentiate the concepts of substantive and formal theory: in their view, substantive theory is particularly relevant to a specific type of situation, phenomenon or interaction, while formal theory is applied at

a broader conceptual level, where the emerging concepts are universally relevant and conceptually applicable to all groups. While both substantive and formal theory development are specifically provided for in the framework and methodology of grounded theory, they are often confused; Suddaby (2006), for example, acknowledges the conceptual existence of substantive theory development, while referring to formal theory development under broader term of “grounded theory.” This appears to be a misreferencing of a subsequently cited quote from the formative definition of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1999), in which they described “formal grounded theory” as being separate and distinct from “substantive grounded theory.” The theoretical results of the current study are intended to represent and be interpreted as substantive theory; they are seen as relevant in the context of how individual participants support the project initiation process, but are not seen as being more broadly applicable or generalizable, at least not at this point.

Researcher as Instrument

As a researcher, I bring my own biases and perceptions to the conduct of this study. Because qualitative research relies upon participant interpretation of meaning (with interpretation at times being done by both the participant and the researcher), and because the means by which data is collected and its subsequent interpretation and analysis is open to the influence of the researcher, it is important to situate the researcher in the context of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998). It is appropriate, therefore, to declare my biases up front and, in so doing, to help readers to understand how these biases may have influenced the conduct of this study, and how I endeavoured to minimize their impact on the research.

From a theoretical perspective, my ontological leanings are predominantly constructivist in nature, while my epistemological preferences are largely pragmatic. In constructivist ontology, meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting; the creation of meaning is a product of social processes, as participants endeavour to create meaning based upon a historical and social perspective (Creswell, 1998). Pragmatists are largely driven by an epistemological emphasis on “what works”; as a result, there is a willingness to consider and adopt multiple methods, numerous worldviews and an array of possible research traditions in

designing and conducting research (Creswell, 1998). In this context, "...truth is what works at the time; it is not based in a strict dualism between the mind and a reality completely independent of the mind" (Creswell, 1998, p. 12). I have brought this perspective to the design of the study; while I have endeavoured to adhere to the methodological principles of grounded theory as something that appear "to work" in the formulation of a theoretical view of personal involvements and influence in project initiation processes, at all times I attempted to ensure that the analysis and conclusions were guided by the data rather than any specific ideological or ontological viewpoints that I hold.

At the same time, from an empirical perspective, I bring to the study a strong level of understanding and experience to the subject matter. I have more than twenty years of experience as a management consultant. In this practice capacity, I have worked with numerous organizations in the public and private sectors supporting the development and implementation of organizationally-focussed methodologies and practices. These have included processes to support strategic planning, portfolio management, and project prioritization, evaluation and selection—all of which are areas of practice that have a direct bearing on the overall process of project initiation. The analysis and interpretation of the results of this study were inevitably influenced to some degree by my practical experiences, and my perception of what I have observed as being effective or ineffective in my own experiences. I also have close to fifteen years of experience as a researcher in investigating the practice of project management in organizations. This includes early work related to the benchmarking of project management maturity models and most recently, participation as co-lead investigator of a large, international investigation into the value of project management to organizations; this latter study involved 48 researchers and 65 case studies in more than 18 countries worldwide. As a result, the analysis and interpretation of the current study were also likely influenced by previous studies with which I have been involved and organizations within which I have conducted research. Nonetheless, I have endeavoured to present the results of this study in the voice of the participants, and, to the greatest degree possible, to ensure that the findings honestly reflect what has emerged from the data provided by the participants.

Research Design

Having specifically selected grounded theory, and the formulation of substantive theory, as the methodological underpinnings of this study, the approach to conducting the research adhered as closely as possible to the conventions associated with grounded theory research. The process that was predominantly followed was that described by Corbin and Strauss (Corbin Strauss, 2008), with occasional augmentation with additional sources (such as Breckenridge et al., 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1965) where there was a requirement for further clarification on approach, or challenges encountered in conducting the study. This section reviews the approach adopted in conducting the study, and particularly the strategies associated with participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis.

Participant Recruitment

The sampling strategy for this study was predominantly driven by an emphasis on theoretical sampling, which was in part opportunistic in nature. Sampling strategies in grounded theory are markedly different than those recommended or sanctioned for other methods of inquiry, and particularly for quantitative techniques; rather than emphasizing techniques to ensure, for example, random participation, sampling strategies in grounded theory are “theory based” and as such endeavour to ensure representativeness of theoretical perspectives (Creswell, 1998). As advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2008), in the current study the sampling strategy endeavoured to seek involvement from participants who could further elaborate on the theoretical concepts being explored. Targeted participants were those who were involved in an array of industries, including public and private sectors. Ideal individual participants had been involved in the project initiation process in their organizations, and could provide input into their experiences in that area. Initial participants were sought through invitational emails forwarded to executive MBA students at two universities, and through direct invitations to a mailing list of professionals with an interest in project management. As the study continued, additional participants were identified by focussing specifically on executive-level mailing list candidates at the directorial, general managerial and vice presidential levels who could further expand on the concepts emerging within the research. As well, however, and largely for reasons of pragmatism,

the sampling strategy was what Creswell (1998) describes as “opportunistic”: while all participants included in the study had some perspective on the project initiation process, some were included primarily because they volunteered to be involved. Corbin and Strauss (1990) explicitly recognize and allow for participation on “the basis of convenience,” acknowledging that we may at times need to include whomever walks in the door and volunteers to participate. Through the serendipity of voluntary participation and the specific targetting of specific perspectives and expertise, the participants in this study ultimately reflected a broad and diverse background, experience and insight into project initiation decisions.

Overview of participants. While the use of grounded theory does not specifically require or even suggest that general demographic information should be included unless those emerge as core concepts that support the larger study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), it is nonetheless helpful to have some contextual understanding of the participants whose collective inputs have led to the findings and analysis that are being presented.

The participants in this study were drawn predominantly from organizations throughout North America (specifically Canada and the United States), but there were also two international participants (Australia), as illustrated in Table 2:

Table 2 - Geographic Distribution of Participants

Country	# Participants
Canada	18
United States	8
International	2

Participants in the study worked in a variety of sectors, and in a range of different industries. Sectors included for-profit, not-for-profit and government/public-sector organizations. Participants self-identified the industries in which they worked as follows:

Table 3 - Industry Distribution of Participants

Industry	# Participants
Aerospace	1
Consulting	2
Education	9
Finance	2
Government	5
Insurance	3
Mining, Oil & Gas	2
Pharmaceuticals	1
Professional Association	1
Retail	1
Telecommunications	1

While they had all been involved in supporting the project initiation process in some manner, participants identified that they performed various different roles within their organizations, as illustrated in the following table:

Table 4 - Role Distribution of Participants

Position	# Participants
Executive	5
Mid-management	14
Project Management	9

The profiles described in tables 2 through 4 are not provided in order to suggest that the results of this study will be generalizable to all decision making contexts. At the same time, however, they show that the participants are drawn from a sufficiently broad

cross-section of sectors, industries and organizations, with a corresponding variety of project types and roles, that the findings with respect to how project initiation decisions are made should be reasonably representative to the majority of readers of this study.

Theoretical sampling. Determination of the number of participants was a product of theoretical sampling. Some interpretations of grounded theory define explicit numbers as targets to ensure sufficient breadth of perspectives; Creswell (1998), for example, indicates that 25 to 30 participants is generally considered to be representative in a grounded theory study. This approach is specifically criticized by Suddaby (2006) as being an incorrect application of the process of grounded theory, and Corbin and Strauss (2008) state that sampling is a product of the exploration of concepts, represented as theoretical saturation of the emerging concepts and categories. Theoretical saturation is specifically described as full development of the dimensionality of the properties and categories, such that there is sufficient breadth of understanding and clarity to support theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Theoretical saturation occurs where all categories are well developed in terms of dimension and variation, and further data gathering is unlikely to add further conceptual understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the context of this study, theoretical saturation was employed as a guide in adopting an approach of theoretical sampling. The essential code structure employed in the analysis was established within eighteen interviews. The last eight interviews provided additional clarity, insight and illustrative power, but no new codes were added to the analysis structure during this time, providing some confidence that theoretical saturation had been attained.

Presentation of participant information. In conducting this study, every effort was made to keep the findings grounded in the data that was collected, and to present participant experiences in a manner that illustrates and provides contextual richness to the concepts being discussed. At the same time, a central ethical consideration that was addressed in the study design, and that is central to the ethics approval obtained to conduct this study, is that of protecting the confidentiality of individual respondents. As such, all inputs to this study have been anonymized and no information that would enable the identification of organizations or individual participants has been included. Quotations that are included in this study are identified by a case number in

parentheses, in order to maintain continuity of understanding while protecting participant confidentiality. Table 5 is a summary overview of tables 2 through 4, and provides a broader contextual understanding of the participants:

Table 5 - Summary Overview of Case Participants

Case #	Country	Industry	Position
1	Australia	Finance	Mid-management
2	Canada	Government	Mid-management
3	Canada	Government	Executive
4	Canada	Government	Mid-management
5	Canada	Insurance	Mid-management
6	United States	Pharmaceuticals	Mid-management
7	Canada	Insurance	Executive
8	Canada	Government	Executive
9	Canada	Government	Mid-management
10	Canada	Professional Assoc.	Executive
11	United States	Education	Mid-management
12	United States	Education	Project Manager
13	United States	Education	Project Manager
14	United States	Education	Project Manager
15	United States	Education	Mid-management
16	Canada	Mining, Oil & Gas	Mid-management
17	Canada	Mining, Oil & Gas	Mid-management
18	United States	Aerospace	Mid-management
19	Canada	Retail	Mid-management
20	Canada	Consulting	Mid-management
21	Canada	Finance	Project Manager
22	Canada	Education	Executive

Case #	Country	Industry	Position
23	Canada	Insurance	Project Manager
24	Australia	Telecommunications	Project Manager
25	United States	Education	Project Manager
26	Canada	Education	Project Manager
27	Canada	Education	Mid-management
28	Canada	Consulting	Project Manager

Data Collection

When conducting substantive theory development, investigation of a topic within grounded theory will be informed by a review of the literature related to the phenomenon under investigation. This review is a necessary step in providing a direction for initial questioning within interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998). While the approach in early interviews is informed by this exploratory literature review, in subsequent interviews the line of questioning evolves: a process of constant comparison highlights further lines of inquiry, as the researcher attempts to “saturate” the categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998). This process can often lead to serendipitous discoveries, as information and concepts emerge fortuitously, whether as a result of a particular participant being included in the study or a specific insight being offered (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In conducting this study, the questions were initially informed by an interview protocol that was developed as a result of the preliminary literature review; the interview protocol is included within Appendix B. The questions comprising the interview protocol, and their alignment with key elements of the preliminary literature review, are included within Appendix C.

Data collection in the study was predominantly interview based. For the current study, I adopted a semi-structured interview approach that explored decision making scenarios with each participant, as well as probing to understand at a more detailed level the overall decision making environment in which project initiation decisions were made within the participant’s organization. Questions were open ended, and participants were asked to describe their observations and their perceptions of process,

and to explain how they would approach specific situations within their organization. Prompting questions were also employed where participants were reticent or perfunctory in their response, in order to elicit as full a response as possible. As discussed above, the questions continued to evolve in subsequent interviews on the basis of theoretical sampling, as I endeavoured to attain theoretical saturation. Each interview was approximately an hour long, although in some instances the interview was allowed to continue for as long as 90 minutes. Because of geographic distribution of participants, and to provide a consistent means of capturing participant inputs, all interviews were conducted over the phone. Detailed interview notes were captured during the interview, and the interview was also digitally recorded. The recording provided an enduring record of the verbatim discussion, which was used to review the detailed interview notes and ensure as faithful and complete a written transcription of the conversation as possible. The transcripts that resulted for each interview were between 3000 and 6000 words, providing a comprehensive and rich pool of data for subsequent qualitative analysis. In conducting the interviews, additional lines of inquiry emerged as being particularly fruitful over time, while others were abandoned as not providing relevant insight. The interview approach allowed the emphasis of particular categories to shift as participant inputs continued to expand the dimensionality of the emerging concepts and categories.

The study also benefited from fortuitous circumstances. Initial participants who volunteered to participate were in many instances employed as project managers in their organizations, rather than being the executives that I had hoped to attract—and who were, indeed, added later to the study. Being less senior, these initial volunteers often brought to the study a politically naive and process-based view of the initiation process within their organization. While this was initially perceived as not being relevant, and there was a temptation to not include specific participants in the results, their responses ultimately served to provide a useful and interesting counterpoint to those of the more executive-level participants who later contributed to the study. As well, two later volunteers together brought a very similar perspective on the project initiation process that provided more conceptual richness and some excellent examples, allowing me access to concepts and categories that had been identified earlier but had been

discussed by comparatively fewer participants. While at times the process of participant identification was indeed serendipitous, the result was what it needed to be; all of the participants were necessary in order to result in the theoretical saturation of concepts and categories that was ultimately attained.

Measures of personality. In addition to the interview process, there was also a desire to understand the underlying personality preferences of the individual participants in order to evaluate the degree to which they influenced the project initiation process. Personality is a product of different degrees of preferences for traits as described by Carl Jung in his *Theory of Psychological Types* (Jung, 1971). A Jungian-based personality preferences evaluator, Insights Discover, was employed to evaluate participant preferences. The instrument was chosen in part because it is one that I am familiar with and certified to use. Insights Discover was also chosen over more popularly used evaluators, and in particular the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), as there are a number of concerns that have been raised regarding the reliability of MBTI (Garden, 1991; Michael, 2003; Vacha-Haase & Thompson, 2002). In particular, MBTI introduces a fourth scale not found in Jung's model (Salter, Evans, & Forney, 1997), requires a forced-choice response that measures preference but not intensity (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) and makes distinctions between gender preferences (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). The validity of Insights Discovery has been assessed as being of strong validity for the dimensions of personality that it claims to measure by the British Psychological Society (2009).

Participants in the current study completed a 25-question proprietary instrument, which resulted in a numeric measure of their preferences for the four dimensions of personality measured by the Insights Discovery Preference Evaluator. The four scores relate primarily to Jung's rational attitudinal functions, and are presented within the instrument as four different "colour energies." The four scores, the primary colour preferences, and the flexibility of the participants (as measured by the number of dimensions of personality for which each has an indicated preference) were included as coded data within the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis strategy within this study predominantly relied upon the coding and analysis approach associated with grounded theory. Analysis is a result of coding and memo-writing, and consists of three discrete stages of coding: open, axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998). In addition, while open coding and axial coding were discussed in earlier definitions of Straussian grounded theory as being separate and distinct, today this is seen as an artificial distinction designed to articulate two different conceptual modes of analyzing data that, of necessity, occur at the same time (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For this reason, the discussion of open coding and axial coding within this study are combined. This subsection discusses this study's approach to data analysis, including that taken in conducting open and axial coding, the process of selective coding, the formulation of the theoretical framework developed in conducting this study, and the statistical analysis that was conducted to support interpretation of the personality preferences results.

Open and axial coding. The process of open and axial coding occurred throughout the research process, from conducting initial interviews through to finalization of the analysis process. Open coding involves breaking apart the data collected during the research process in order to delineate concepts; axial coding involves relating identified concepts together and seeking meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To facilitate the process of coding and analysis, I employed a qualitative research software package called HyperResearch (Hesse-Biber, S., Kindler, T. S., & Dupuis, P., 2011). Each of the interview transcripts was imported into the software, enabling open and axial coding of each interview using the evolving code book and providing a single repository to support selective coding and subsequent analysis.

Open coding. In open coding, the individual concepts and categories are identified, given appropriate names, and described and explored through the extensive creation of memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This is an iterative process of analysis, reading and re-reading the interviews, and identifying the meaningful component pieces of information represented within the data. From this analysis, individual codes can be assigned that "stand in for" and create meaning regarding the concept that has been identified by the participant. In conducting this study, every effort was made to work

from the data as much as possible. While the questions that were originally developed from the literature certainly influenced the direction and information provided, there was no initial set of pre-defined codes on which the open coding was based. The answers to the questions were reviewed in detail, individual concepts were extracted, and open codes were assigned to these concepts. An example of the approach adopted in open coding, based upon an extract of one of the participant interviews, is provided in the following table. This includes identification of the raw data, the codes that have been assigned and the memos that I have developed as I have reviewed and interpreted meaning regarding the data that were collected:

Table 6 - Example of approach to open coding

Interview Data	Codes	Memos
<p>Q: What is the influence of politics on project initiation situations such as this? How are politics typically exercised in such situations?</p> <p>A: Fairly significant. Our organization is actually a merged organization. It was two banks, but we merged five years ago nearly, but it is still a reasonably political environment. While the cultures are merging, there is still a prevalence of the two heritage cultures in the organization. We have been working to put in place more effective governance at the program and portfolio level, because the nature of initiating projects actually makes it very difficult to try and manage from a resourcing and cost perspective, and actually scheduling out the projects.</p>	<p>Politics - strong influence</p> <p>Politics - cultural influence</p>	<p>High level of influence of politics. Particularly with respect to project initiation. Strongly influenced by the culture of the organization, and differences of view point between the two different cultures. Significant influence on how the decisions around projects are made, and the degree of scrutiny applied to them.</p>

Interview Data	Codes	Memos
<p>We have been talking to a number of the executive to improve—to make decision making process a little more fluid and a little more precise. When we have spoken to executives has been very interesting. When you get them one on one, how the politics and the various power bases play out is very much from a heritage perspective. One was a retail bank, and the one was a wholesale bank selling products through third parties.</p>	<p>Politics - cultural influence</p>	<p>Scrutiny, analysis and detailed considerations a product of organizational culture. Dependent upon which region of the organization you belong to, which original organization, and what focus you have now. Retail bank clearly has primacy—wholesale projects much less emphasis and consideration, and significantly less project funding.</p>
<p>We have a quite large project going right now—consuming half of our resources and our expenditure. Half of the executives are very supportive of the project, and the others are questioning whether we are at the right level of investment. I don't think anyone is questioning whether it was the right investment, but we are now investing 50%-60% more than intended. There are a number of executives who are questioning behind closed doors whether that is an appropriate level of investment. They won't question it in an open forum, though.</p>	<p>Politics - avoidance</p>	<p>Strong level of unwillingness to publicly challenge decisions. While disagreements and different viewpoints exist, they are not expressed in a public forum—only behind closed doors.</p>

Interview Data	Codes	Memos
Q: What is necessary to ensure political and group alignment on initiation decisions like this? A: That is the thing we have been really challenged to try and come up with. We are not an organization that particularly likes structured processes or frameworks for decision making. We tend to stay very heavily away from those things as being too complex and burdensome. It is very much more around trying to engage all of the various stakeholders and getting the buy-in before the paper goes up to the executive, so it is a lot of lobbying if you want to get a project approved.	Process - avoids rigour	Tendency to avoid rigour and process—low level of structure. Not a desire for formality in decision making. Avoids complexity—perception that process is “burdensome.”

Axial coding. Creswell (1998) recommends that the researcher initially identify categories and concepts by completely reading through the data that has been collected, and from this identify a short list—between five and six initial categories—that can continue to be expanded upon as the data is reviewed and re-reviewed. After an initial set of interviews using the standard interview protocol, I utilized this approach, getting an overall sense of the data that was emerging, and identifying the high-level initial categories. This resulted in the following initial categories being identified as a framework in which to develop the axial coding structure; these are expanded upon in more detail in the next chapter:

- Ability to influence
- Agreement to initiate
- Formality of approach
- Clarity of decision
- Information to initiate
- Value of decision
- Overall rule system

In addition to the major code categories that emerged from the data, categories were also developed to organize individual and organizational demographic information, as recommended by Creswell (1998). I continued to expand upon and broaden the categories and concepts as I conducted further interviews, using a constant comparative approach to identify and further develop themes and concepts being outlined by participants. These concepts were ultimately sorted and organized into meaningful sub-categories within the overall categories identified above. For example, the following codes represented the open codes that emerged under the overall category of “Agreement to initiate”:

- arbitrary process
- avoidance
- board decides
- committee decides
- consensus decision
- constructive politics
- cultural influence
- decision is inferred
- delegated decision
- disagreement
- discussion
- executive decides
- executive leads
- executive team decides
- formal sign-off
- initiation and planning
- initiation as doing
- initiation distinct
- initiation unclear
- insufficient process
- initiation as PMO
- little influence

- no documentation
- no initiation
- seek buy-in
- strong influence
- unaware of politics
- unclear process
- verbal commitment

Working with the initial list of codes, I worked to group the codes into meaningful sub-categories that provided a relevant understanding of the dimensionality and variability of each concept. The codes appeared to segregate into four essential sub-categories: decision formality, decision politics, decision process and decision recognition. The resulting codes structure is illustrated in the following table, identifying the sub-category, codes and overall meaning of each category:

Table 7 - Example of approach to axial coding

Sub-category	Codes	Definition
Decision formality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decision is inferred • formal sign-off • no documentation • verbal commitment 	Formality by which project initiation decisions are evidenced within the organization
Decision politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • avoidance • constructive politics • cultural influence • disagreement • little influence • seek buy-in • strong influence • unaware of politics 	Characterization of the political environment that influences how decisions are made within the organization

Sub-category	Codes	Definition
Decision process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • arbitrary process • board decides • committee decides • consensus decision • delegated decision • discussion • executive decides • executive leads • executive team decides • insufficient process • unclear process 	The process by which project initiation decisions are actually made within the organization
Decision recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiation and planning combined • initiation as doing • initiation as PMO • initiation distinct • initiation unclear • no initiation 	The degree to which there is recognition that an initiation decision has been made within the organization, and the elements of process that are being addressed when initiation occurs

This ultimately resulted in a three-level structure of categories and concepts that is further discussed in the findings chapter (Chapter 5). In the coding example above, for example, the first-order structure is the category of “Agreement to initiate.” Within the category, four sub-categories emerge: “decision formality,” “decision politics,” “decision process” and “decision recognition.” Within the second-order sub-categories emerge the codes that were identified during open coding.

Selective coding. Through a process of selective coding, the core category of participant agency was identified, as well as several supporting concepts that collectively served to describe how individuals participate in and influence the process of project initiation within organizations. The process of selective coding is premised on the identification of the core category, or what is described by Creswell (1998) as the single phenomenon that represents the central category of interest. This represents the central theme of the research, and it has the ability to convey theoretically what the research is about (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Corbin (2008) identifies five principles by which a potential core category should be validated:

- it should be abstract;
- it should appear frequently within the data;

- it should be logical and consistent with the data, rather than being forced;
- it should be abstract enough to support research within other areas; and
- it should grow in depth and explanatory power as other categories are related to it.

The core category that emerged in conducting this study, the concept of participant agency, appeared to meet the criteria identified above, and provided a solid base on which to further develop conceptual meaning of the study results. This concept was developed after an intensive and lengthy review of the data, during which I identified a number of relevant themes that could have been considered as the core category, including: decision influence, decision role, political disposition, decision-making culture, politics, process and decision formality. Once the theme of agency was expanded to include not merely being present within participant descriptions, but also to include the degree of perceived agency (from little perceived agency to significant degrees of perceived agency), it emerged as the central core category that could conceptually explain the majority of variability and provide explanatory power to all of the participant descriptions. With identification of the core category, evaluation of the supporting categories through selective coding was possible. This involved reviewing and re-reviewing the cases to identify those concepts that had the greatest degree of relevance in explaining the operation and influence of the core category. This included conducting extensive analysis of the relationships among concepts, and the development of tables that enabled assessment of the degree to which the relationships implied that a level of influence existed between concepts. The approach to selective coding, and the concepts that emerged as being primarily influenced by the core category, is discussed extensively in the analysis and theory development chapter (Chapter 6) of this study.

Theory development. This study resulted in the development of a theoretical framework that identifies the influence of agency and rule emphasis on the effectiveness of project initiation decisions. Grounded theory is unique among many research approaches for its specific emphasis on the development of theory as a result of conducting the research, rather than the formulation of a conceptual model in advance of data collection (Creswell, 1998). The presentation of theory should identify the relationship amongst categories, and identify the conditions and consequences that

influence the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 1998). It should be an abstract representation of the data collected during the study, and be able to account for the full level of variation observed within the collected data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The presentation of theory in a grounded theory study should also emphasize a creative component of synthesizing and interpreting meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Suddaby, 2006). “Successful grounded theory research has a clear creative component. Glaser and Strauss were aware of this component and the tension it would create with those who find comfort in trusting an algorithm to produce results” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 638). The development of the theoretical framework in this study was drawn directly from the concepts and categories emerging from the data. The theory was developed around a central category that emerged late in the analysis, although it was one that thematically repeated itself in a number of ways in the descriptions provided by participants. The theoretical framework draws on several different models of behaviour to offer an explanation that appears to satisfy the broad level of variation observed across the participants within the study.

Statistical analysis. In interpreting the results of the study and conducting the analysis, a quantitative component of data was also incorporated. While grounded theory is often considered as a qualitative approach to research, it is considered by its developers to be neutral in terms of both epistemological stance and source of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 2010). While in the context of this study most of the data collected was in the form of interviews, the use of the Insights Discovery Preferences Evaluator to assess personality preferences provided a small amount of quantitative data which was also analyzed. In addition to being coded as data alongside the interview inputs of each participant, the results of the personality preference evaluator was evaluated statistically to assess its correlation with several of the conceptual categories that emerged after open and axial coding. This approach is supported by Langley (1999), who notes that some quantification can be useful, although it “...will be much more convincing if it is used in combination with other approaches that allow contextualization of the abstract data, adding nuances of interpretation and confirming the mechanics of the mathematical model with direct evidence.” (Langley, 1999, p. 698). While the analysis is still primarily qualitative in

nature, the incorporation of quantitative aspects was specifically included where it provided additional analytical insights.

The quantitative data available for analysis were comprised of the results of the Insights Discovery Preferences Evaluator that each participant completed. This model provides results for four dimensions of personality, largely corresponding to Jung's rational attitudinal functions. The scores for each dimension represent an interval scale, in the form of a six-point Likert scale. Where interval data is available, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) can be performed to assess the degree to which different factors associated with an independent variable have statistically significant levels of variance of their means (thus rejecting the null hypothesis that all factors vary equally) (Furlong, Lovelace, & Lovelace, 2000). Subsequently, a Tukey multiple comparison of means can be applied to conduct a pairwise comparison of the means of each pair of factors to identify where there is a statistically significant difference between factors (Cohen, 2008). As part of the analysis of this study, a statistical analysis using an ANOVA, in conjunction with Tukey's multiple comparison of means, was conducted to assess the degree to which there was a statistically significant level of variation attributable to personality scores, when compared with the factors within those categories that emerged as a result of selective coding. These results are discussed as part of the discussion of selective coding, and in particular the discussion of personality, in the analysis and theory-development chapter (Chapter 6) of this study.

Ethical considerations. As a thesis being conducted through Bond University, this study is subject to human research ethics policies. These include securing approval from the Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee (BUHREC) prior to recruiting participants and conducting data collection. In complying with the human research ethics policies of the university, I instituted a number of provisions to protect the privacy and personal security of research participants, including:

- providing all research participants with an ethics statement outlining the expectations of the involvement, and the provisions in place to protect their involvement;

- providing assurances to all participants that their involvement was voluntary, and that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time (whereupon any information related to their involvement would be destroyed);
- undertaking to ensure that all participants remain anonymous, and are not identifiable through their participation or contributions;
- undertaking to maintain the security and protection of all data associated with their participation while it remains available to me for analysis.

Validation

Validation is a central consideration of any research strategy. While traditional forms of research have established and well-accepted approaches to establish the reliability and validity of research results, doing so is more complicated when conducting qualitative research and particularly when conducting grounded theory research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). “Grounded theorists share a conviction with many other qualitative researchers that the usual canons of ‘good science’ should be retained, but require *redefinition* in order to fit the realities of qualitative research and the complexities of social phenomena” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 4; emphasis in original). This requires making explicit the procedures and approaches by which the research is conducted and at which the findings and conclusions were arrived, in order for reviewers to assess for themselves the quality of the research approach and the validity and reliability of the resulting findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Suddaby, 2006). This sub-section provides an overview of the degree to which this study complies with accepted standards of validity for grounded theory research, and offers the reader an objective means of assessing this validity.

One of the complications of qualitative research is that, for as many methods as exist by which to conduct the research, within any given study there are far more numerous avenues by which the results of the study may be interpreted. Any results and findings are not the only plausible outcomes, but they are the ones in which the researcher places the greatest confidence from the perspective of credibility (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To address this, Corbin and Strauss (2008) identified guidelines by which the quality and validity of grounded theory research might be established; this includes description sufficient for readers to vicariously situate themselves in the

research as if they were involved, providing them with evidence of how the research was conducted and applicability of the research findings. This approach is in concordance with the principles of validation as described by Suddaby):

When I review a paper containing a claim of grounded theory, I check to ensure that, at a minimum, the authors have described their methodology transparently enough to reassure me that they followed core analytic tenets (i.e., theoretical sampling, constant comparison) in generating the data and that I can reasonably assess how the data were used to generate key conceptual categories.

(Suddaby, 2006, p. 640)

The following discussion explores the relevance of this study based upon the defined criteria.

In order to assess the validity of this study, I offer further clarification regarding how the study was approached, based upon accepted guidelines for grounded theory research. The guidelines articulated by Corbin and Strauss (1990) emphasize providing enough detail to judge how data was collected and analysis was carried out, how sampling occurred and whether the research process was appropriately adequate. The following points articulate each of the criteria defined by Corbin & Strauss (1990) with respect to the research process, and include a description of how this study was conducted based upon each identified criterion:

- *How was the original sample selected?* The original sample was identified opportunistically, in that participants were sought who were willing to participate and who had been involved in the project initiation process within their organizations. Subsequent sampling efforts focussed on securing appropriate levels of involvement in project initiation (e.g., project manager, mid-management and executive-level participants)—participants who could provide a sufficient cross-section of perspectives to attain theoretical sampling. This was ultimately realized through a combination of including voluntary participants and then later specifically targeting individual participants who were thought to be able to provide additional dimensionality to the categories emerging within the study. These added dimensions included not only sufficient levels of executive

involvement, but also of agency (initially presumed to be those individuals operating at a senior level within their organization).

- *What major categories emerged?* The early categories that emerged while conducting open and axial coding included “ability to influence,” “agreement to initiate,” “formality of approach,” “clarity of decision,” “information to initiate,” “value of decision” and “overall rule system”; the development of these categories, and the concepts that emerged within them, are further discussed in the findings chapter (Chapter 5). While these categories provide a framework that encompasses the full breadth of concepts discussed by the participants, they are necessarily broader than those that were identified in conducting selective coding. The ultimate categories that support the central core category of “agency” in explaining the variation in the data and providing a basis for the resulting theoretical framework are those of “rule emphasis,” “process effectiveness,” “rule effectiveness,” “process formality,” “process consistency,” “decision process clarity,” “personal influences,” “decision politics” and “project shaper formality.”
- *What were some of the events, incidents and actions that indicated the major categories?* The major categories emerged after a great deal of effort working through axial and, ultimately, selective coding. While participants approached and influenced the process of project initiation from many different perspectives, I found little that provided a broad level of explanatory power until I revisited some of the initial readings I had done on social rules theory. “Agency” is a concept that is discussed within the literature, and is presumed to exist and be held by actors as they interact with rules systems. It was only after I realized that this aspect was not universally being described, and that a number of participants in fact spoke of a perceived lack of agency, that the essential core category began to emerge. This led to an exploration of those factors that influence the enabling (or constraining) of agency, as discussed further in the analysis and theory development chapter (Chapter 6) of this study.
- *On the basis of what categories did theoretical sampling proceed? How representative did these categories prove to be?* The initial theoretical sampling

was primarily driven by the organizational level of participants; there were a number of early participants who were at the project-manager level, and did not therefore have an executive-level perspective of the initiation process—although this ultimately proved to provide a useful and fortuitous contribution to the research findings. As well, as noted above, the concept of agency within the rule system was emerging as an important category within the analysis, and even during interviews it became clear that it had an important impact in participant organizations. This led to subsequent recruitment efforts that targeted executive-level participants (particularly vice presidents and general managers) who could provide more senior views of the process and who were thought, due to their seniority, to possess greater levels of agency than had the earlier recruits.

- *What were some of the hypotheses that arose pertaining to relations among categories?* The hypotheses regarding relations among categories are explained in detail in the analysis and theoretical development chapter (Chapter 6) of this study. These hypotheses are all firmly drawn from the data, and are illustrated by a number of vignettes that have been included in Chapter 6.
- *Were there instances when the hypotheses did not hold up against what was actually seen?* While the majority of participant cases conformed with the hypotheses resulting from this study, one negative case did not fully conform to the expectations of the theory. This is discussed in greater detail in the analysis and theoretical development chapter (Chapter 6) of this study.
- *How and why was the core category selected? Was the selection sudden or gradual, difficult or easy?* The selection of the core category is discussed in the analysis and theoretical development chapter (Chapter 6) of this study. As mentioned above, the core category only emerged over time and after extensive review of the participant interviews and the results of open and axial coding. While numerous themes showed promise in terms of a core category (including political influences, variations in process, and conformity of espoused and actual processes) none of these provided sufficient explanatory power across all participant descriptions to be viable as a core category. It was only after returning to the literature, and reviewing the expectations regarding agency as articulated

there –as compared with very real differences being observed by numerous participants – did a compelling core category emerge that could serve as a basis for theory development.

In addition to articulating criteria by which to assess the actual research process, Corbin and Strauss (1990) also set out criteria by which to assess the empirical grounding of the findings. In other words, they established criteria to evaluate and test the degree to which the results are relevant at a practice level. The following points outline each of the criteria with respect to the empirical grounding of the findings, and include a description of how the study results relate to each criterion:

- *Are concepts generated?* The study resulted in numerous concepts being identified, all of which are extensively grounded in the data collected from participants. A central emphasis throughout the research process was to work directly from the data to the greatest degree possible in conducting open coding and in developing concepts and categories through axial coding. The initial categories and concepts that emerged from the interviews are explored in detail in the findings chapter (Chapter 5) of this study; the concepts that resulted in relation to the core category as a result of selective coding are explored in the analysis and theory development chapter (Chapter 6) of this study.
- *Are the concepts systematically related?* The systematic relation of the concepts defined in this study are illustrated in a number of ways. Firstly, the concepts emerging from open and axial coding are presented in a hierarchical, three-level structure of categories and concepts. These categories are then compared with other conceptual frameworks already present in the literature. Finally, the core category and related concepts are presented, and the degree to which these concepts are grounded in the data is illustrated through a number of vignettes. The open and axial coding results are presented in the findings chapter (Chapter 5) of this study, The comparison of the resulting conceptual categories and their relationships, and the conceptual vignettes, are discussed in the theory implications and testing chapter (Chapter 7) of this study.
- *Are there many conceptual linkages and are the categories well developed? Do the categories have conceptual density?* The categories as presented as a result

of selective coding are tightly coupled, logically related and conceptually dense. While each category further elaborates on and provides conceptual richness to the understanding of the core category, each is also itself fully dimensionalized. The participant descriptions, and the example vignettes presented in the theory testing and implications chapter (Chapter 7) of this study illustrate the degree to which each category ranges in properties that are relevant to the core category.

- *Is there much variation built into the theory?* Variation is actually one of the key strengths of the theory. Much of the literature relative to the resulting core category of agency discussed the attributes that must be demonstrated for agency to be held by an actor, whereas the actual participant results indicated a broad range of agency being perceived (from “considerable” to “none at all”). The theory developed in this study provides an explanation of how agency is operationalized (or marginalized) in supporting project initiation decisions. It provides explanatory insight into circumstances where it does not exist, where it partially exists, where it is constrained and where it is able to compensate for other organizational inadequacies.
- *Are the broader conditions that affect the phenomenon under study built into this explanation?* The resulting theory provides insight into a number of broad conditions related to the phenomenon of personal influence on project initiation, and the core category of agency. The theoretical framework presented in the analysis and theory development chapter (Chapter 6) identifies the broader organizational influences on the phenomenon, as well as the variations that are present and have an influence at the level of individual actors.
- *Has “process” been taken into account?* Inherent within the results of this study is an understanding of “process.” The underlying focus of this study, and the basis for the development of a substantive theory, is the process by which project initiation decisions are made. The core category of the study explores how the agency of participants influences the process and rule system associated with initiation. A critical category emerging from the selective coding—which is augmented by and that also constrains agency—is an understanding of process effectiveness. The study explores how these influences are manifested in the

process of stewarding a project from idea through to inception. The resulting theory identifies the actions and interactions of participants that support and contribute to realizing specific process outcomes.

It could be argued that the process that results is more of a 'variable' model than a 'process' model, as discussed in Langley (1995). The theory outlined in the study does align contextually with a variable model, and identifies those factors that influence the process by which project initiation decisions are made. This is not 'process', in the context of defining one universal process of how project initiation decisions occur, or exploring the process of a single organization. It also does not attempt to infer patterns of process, similar to the work of Mintzberg et al (1976) or Nutt (1984a, 1984b) (referred to as a visual mapping strategy in Langley, 1999). What emerges instead is a recognition of how this process varies subject to the rule environment of the organization and agency of the individuals involved in the process.

Grounded theory certainly highlights the importance and influence of process. The approach taken in this study appears to align with the flexibility of approach in evaluating process outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), who suggest "A researcher might think of process in terms of phases, stages, levels, degrees, progress toward a goal, or sequences of action." (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 261). The results would certainly appear to align with the concepts of 'levels', 'degrees' and 'progress toward a goal' (or lack thereof), if not the 'sequences of action'. This would support more of the 'patterns' suggested by the reviewer, rather than 'process'.

Finally, in reference once again to Langley (1999), Langley argues against the artificial division of treating variance and process theories as separate, suggesting that this "...unnecessarily limits the variety of theories constructed" (Langley, 1999, p. 693). In particular, Langley (1999) suggests grounded theory is particularly useful in process analysis to "...explore the interpretations and emotions of different individuals or groups living through the same processes" (Langley, 1999, p. 700).

- *Do the theoretical findings seem significant, and to what extent?* The level of theory development undertaken within this study is substantive theory. The goal is the development of a theory of personal influences on the process of project initiation. In the context of this focus, the theoretical findings provide a broad explanation of individual behaviours and their influence on decision outcomes within the project initiation process. A high level of variation is described and accommodated within the theory, as discussed above, and—within the constraints of the study to date—the resulting theory appears to provide a relevant and practical explanation for how personal actions influence the initiation process within different contexts. This is further explored in the theory testing and implications chapter (Chapter 7).

The above points have identified the critical aspects of the research design, as well as the significance of the study results, in order to provide the reader with sufficient insight by which to assess the results of this study. Throughout the research process, I have endeavoured to adhere to the principles and recommend strategies associated with conducting grounded theory research, particularly as it applies to the development of substantive theory. A question for many readers will be how generalizable the results are to understanding how initiation decisions are made in projects. There are inherent limitations based upon how the study was approached. The stated intent of the study was the development of substantive theory, which is narrowly focussed to a particular subject. As well, grounded theory is intended to develop the most plausible interpretation of the results based upon the participant inputs and the analysis that was conducted (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In conducting the study, theoretical sampling and constant comparison tested for saturation of the concepts being identified and explored. The results highlight important insights which themselves provide opportunities for further exploration. While noting this limitations, I believe that the results are relevant, applicable and, most importantly, grounded in the data and reflective of the lived experience of the research participants.

Ultimately, the test of any theory is in the degree to which it is practically relevant. While there are further lines of inquiry that could be pursued, and any true assessment of relevance must rely upon empirical application of the theoretical framework, the

results as articulated would seem to provide a promising and relevant explanation of the phenomenon of project initiation. In this section, I have endeavoured to describe the approach to the study in sufficient detail to provide the impartial reader with a comprehensive appreciation of the approach that was undertaken in conducting the research. What remains, and is explored in the subsequent chapters, is the presentation of the results of this process, an explanation of the resulting theoretical framework, and a discussion of its relevance for practitioners.

Chapter 5 - Findings

Introduction

In conducting this study, there was a need to comprehensively explore how participants perceived the process of making project initiation decisions, and what is perceived as influencing process and decision effectiveness. While exploring this issue, it was my hope to develop a basis for understanding what factors influence the effectiveness of decision making processes, and the influences of individuals in supporting these processes. This chapter explores the answers to the first two research questions that emerged through conducting this study:

- How do individuals perceive the process of project initiation?
- What influences these perceptions?

The following sections provide an overview of the findings and initial results from the research. The first section discusses the participants and the overall findings that emerged from the research. This section addresses both of the research questions discussed above: individuals' perceptions of the process of project initiation is explored by means of the open coding that emerged within the analysis. What influenced those perceptions is explored through how the open codes have been categorized and presented in this chapter, and illuminated through representative quotations from study participants. Finally, the second section compares and contrasts these findings with the observations of Smith and Winter (2010) in their study on project shaping.

Initial Findings In Exploring Project Initiation

The initial findings of this research are produced from the preliminary analysis and coding of the study results, based upon interviews with each participant and the output of the participants' completed personality profiles. This section discusses the initial categories of concepts that emerged as interviews were conducted and observations were analyzed.

Identification of Initial Categories

In conducting the preliminary analysis and open coding of the first interviews, a number of initial categories emerged. These represented broad groupings of themes within which the participant statements could be grouped. These themes or categories provided an initial framework that served to guide both analysis and the on-going collection of data as I continued to conduct further interviews. As the interview process continued and I worked towards the attainment of theoretical saturation, the initial themes and categories provided a broad umbrella under which new codes and new categories of codes continued to emerge..

The overall structure of categories and themes that emerged through the initial stage of the analysis can be illustrated in the following diagram:

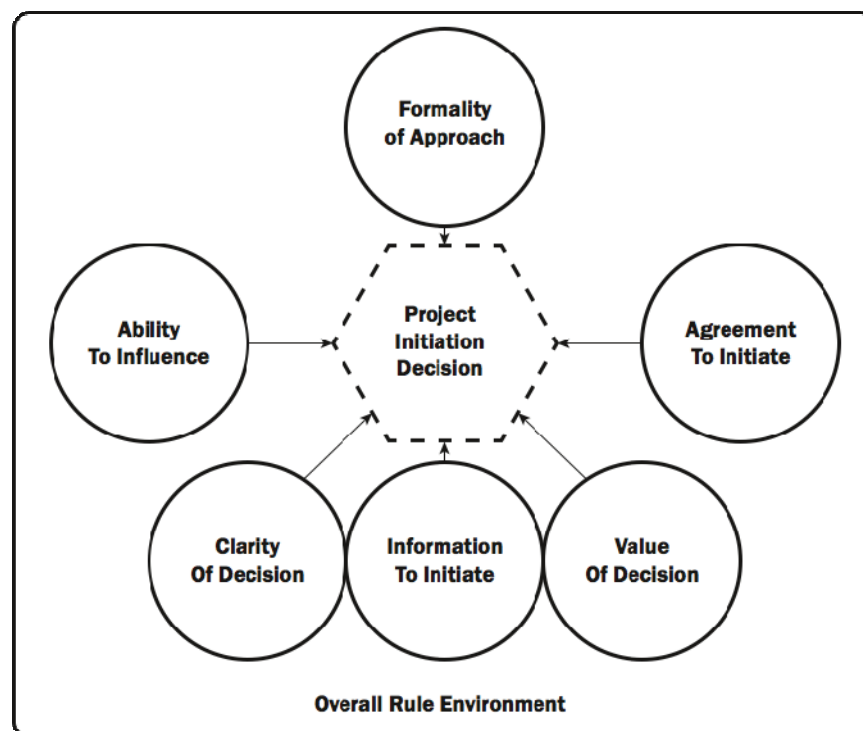


Figure 2. Initial categories of analysis.

The following points provide an overview of the purpose and intent of each of the initial categories emerging from the analysis:

- Ability to influence. The degree of influence and latitude that the participants have on the project initiation process, and consideration of the other influences that may be required at a sponsor or executive level to ensure initiation.
- Agreement to initiate. The degree to which there is actually agreement within the organization to initiate a project. This includes definition of the decision making process and the degree to which a decision is recognized by the participant as having been made.
- Formality of approach. The relative formality of the process supporting project initiation, including the consistency of the process and the formality of the documentation produced within the process.
- Clarity of decision. The degree to which the results of the decision process are clear, understandable and aligned with the direction of the organization.
- Information to initiate. An understanding of the information that is required to be identified and considered as input prior to making the decision.
- Value of decision. The degree to which the value of the potential results of a project are considered as part of the initiation process.
- Overall rule environment. The underlying rule environment within the organization that supports and enables the project initiation process, including the consistency and stability of the rules regarding project initiation and the degree to which they are explicit or implicit.

Discussion Of Themes, Categories and Codes That Emerged During Interviews

The following section provides a more detailed discussion of the core themes, categories and codes that emerged in conducting the research interviews. They are designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the essential concepts that emerged from the interviews, and the dimensionality of each of the concepts that the participants described during the interview process. To avoid the overuse of imprecise descriptions of quantity, such as “a few,” “some,” “many” and “most,” which might lead to a desire on the part of the reader for a more accurate indication of just how many is “many,” I have chosen where relevant to indicate the number of participants indicating the presence of a particular code or concept.

Ability to influence. The primary category of “ability to influence” encompasses the dimensions of the decision making process that are associated with the influence of participants, as well as identification of other influencing factors regarding project initiation decisions. Several sub-categories associated with the “ability to influence” were identified during the interviews, including:

- Decision influence
- Drivers of personal influence
- Influence on the decision making process
- Roles with key influence
- Role of shapers
- Role of sponsors

The majority of participants identified their “decision influence” as providing “input” into the process. For many, this involved the preparation of documentation as input into project initiation decisions. For some this also included their having a role in defining the project and structuring it during the project initiation process. A small number of participants identified that they “participate” in the decision making process; these individuals were typically members of the executive teams that were involved in the project initiation decisions. Several more participants identified that their role was to “recommend” project initiation decisions. Contributing to recommendations was typically either a result of their seniority or position within the organization, or their participation in a committee whose role it was to make recommendations to a subsequent decision making body. Only one participant identified that he or she had a role to “decide” in the project initiation process, meaning that the person would autonomously make an individual decision regarding project initiation. Two other participants identified that while they were impacted by initiation decisions, they had “no influence”; one of them stated, “We pick them up once we inherit them. At what stage? It runs the gamut; we have started a project, and now we need a project manager. We don’t start projects, we catch up to them” (11). Interestingly, my data showed that those who perceived their actual influence on the project initiation process to be comparatively low were often identified as being at relatively senior levels in their organizations. While all participants were involved in some degree in the decision making process, the degree of influence

was often—although not always—related to the seniority of the participant in their organization.

The “drivers of personal influence” codes reflect the various means by which participants identified their ability to personally establish credibility and influence in supporting the project initiation process within their organizations. Participants identified both political and process-based drivers for establishing influence. Political drivers included “political savvy,” “relationships” and “proactive communications,” along with relying upon the exercise of power through “position” and “delegated power.” Process-based drivers included “diligence,” which was characterized as, “Being prepared, doing your homework, anticipating the sorts of questions that might be asked and being prepared for that type of thing” (2). Typically, participants emphasized either process-based or political drivers, but not both; where one aspect (e.g., political) was present, the other tended not to be emphasized.

In defining “influence on the decision making process,” the majority of participants identified that they had “little influence” on how the process of decision making was managed. While they worked within the process, they had little role in shaping the definition and use of the process. This was identified as being either the result of having no direct influence, or being in a situation where influence should have existed but had no impact. “The thing we are trying to do this year is to engage the executive in putting in place more effective levels of governance. That is not winning support at executive; it is winning support from half, and the other half are not in favour of it” (1). Some participants did “contribute” to the decision making process, through their responsibility in overseeing aspects of project initiation, and five participants identified their role as to “define” the initiation process. For three participants responsible for process, this influence was seen as being positive and for one it was new; one additional participant identified that while his or her role was to “define” the process, doing so presented problems. “Struggling with this. Have been butting heads with people that have been there a long time. I am trying to show more modern best practices, use of business cases, scoring models” (18). A few participants indicated that they had “flexibility” within the project initiation process, while two participants identified that they had “no influence” at all. Despite their level of responsibility, there was a

surprisingly small amount of influence on the decision making process by many participants; in addition, even where there was some level of influence, there were often also perceived constraints.

In discussing “roles with key influence,” participants specifically highlighted those roles within their organizations that had particular influence in the initiation decision making process. These tended to be individual positions that exercised significantly more influence or autonomy on project initiation decisions. Eight participants identified the “CEO” as having considerable influence in the initiation process: “If he says we’re doing this, we’re doing it” (7). In several additional organizations, the “CFO or VP Finance” had significant influence over project initiation decisions, while two participants identified the “COO or VP Operations,” one identified the “VP HR” and one identified the “CIO or VP IT” as having particular influence. While many participants described a collaborative decision making process, it was often one that was either influenced or overridden by some members of their executive teams.

Of particular interest was the fact that every participant indicated that the “role of shaper” existed in their organization to some degree. Several participants identified that while this role was present, it was “informal.” In discussing who performs the project shaper role, participants in more than half of the organizations identified a “role by sponsor,” several more participants identified it as a “role by subject-matter expert” and six participants identified the shaper as a “role by project manager.” One participant identified that the role of shaper was not held by one person but was in fact a “role of team.” In discussing the shaper role, “credibility” was identified as a key issue, and while some participants saw the role as positive and supported, many more identified “challenges.” “Sometimes that person isn’t strong enough to do that role—confident, capable. Part of the challenge is to get the person to that level. Where they can be a voice for the staff” (5). This would suggest that most organizations had a role in which someone was responsible for championing the initiation of a project, while the level of authority and scope of responsibility and expertise of the person in that role varied.

In addition to the shaper role, participants also frequently discussed the “role of sponsor.” The vast majority of participants identified the need for a “champion” who was responsible for ownership of the project. At times this role overlapped with the idea of

shaper, and in other contexts it reflected responsibility for on-going business ownership. “When I come back to the sponsor piece, you have to have a sponsor who is engaged and driving and who is leading and is providing the support and removing the hurdles” (3). Nearly half of all participants viewed the role of sponsor as needing to be held at the “executive level,” while one participant identified that on a day-to-day basis this role was typically “delegated.” Three participants indicated that they saw “varying sponsorship” depending upon the importance of the project or the skills of the person in the role, while three additional participants specifically highlighted “weak sponsorship” as being a challenge in their organizations. While sponsorship was identified as being of critical importance by the majority of participants, there were instances where it was inadequate, and its alignment with what participants described as the role of shaper was not always clear.

Agreement to initiate. The primary category of “agreement to initiate” reflects the degree to which there is an agreement within an organization to proceed with initiation of a project, and the category includes the decision making process that is employed and the degree to which the decision is actually recognized. Several sub-categories associated with the “agreement to initiate” were identified in interviews, including:

- Decision formality
- Decision politics
- Decision processes
- Decision recognition

Participants’ discussions of “decision formality” reflected a wide diversity in formality regarding how project initiation decisions are currently recognized among different organizations. For two participants, decisions were “inferred”; in other words, because activity was happening on a project, there was a belief that somewhere, someone had made a decision to do the project. The majority of participants indicated that decisions are the products of “verbal commitments.” “Ultimately, the decision won’t be made in presentation – they will sit on it a little bit, they will talk it over amongst themselves, and then a week or so later they will announce a decision” (19). Only seven participants described an environment where there is “formal sign-off” on project

initiation decisions, while another two described an environment where there was “no documentation.” “Not even great decision tracking, or even writing decisions down” (2). For the majority of participants, decisions were recognized as occurring but the formality of those decisions was often perceived as being quite informal.

The influence of “decision politics” was discussed in detail by virtually all participants. This sub-category describes the degree to which the political environment of participant organizations influences the approach to project initiation decision making. Politics were identified as having a “strong influence” on project initiation decisions in 23 cases. The participants described politics as being, “...absolutely huge. Worse on some, but absolutely in all” (22). Eighteen participants saw politics as critical in endeavouring to “seek buy-in” in support of project initiation activities. Depending on the participant, political activities associated with project initiation were seen as positive or negative. Nine participants described a political environment characterized by “disagreement,” while six participants described a political culture that they characterized as “constructive.” Twelve participants indicated that there was a strong “culture influence” on the political environment. A further eight participants characterized the political environment as one of “avoidance,” reflecting a decision-making environment where there is a “...mostly risk-averse culture – it doesn’t deal with outright confrontation. We will sheepishly address them. And they will do it again next time” (13). Lastly, three participants indicated that they were “unaware of politics”; these individuals identified the process of project initiation as having more influence than the political discussions that surround it. While politics was described as being critical to the process of project initiation, how politics emerged was very different across participant organizations.

The ways in which participants described the actual process by which decisions were made varied considerably, including environments where “the board decides,” “the executive decides,” “the executive leads,” “the executive team decides,” and “the committee decides.” One participant indicated that the responsibility for decision making was in fact “delegated.” Twelve participants identified that the decision making process operated on “consensus,” indicating that, “At the executive level, a lot of it is getting consensus on what actual potential benefits would arise. Clarity in terms of priorities, compared with other initiatives. Alignment” (10). Another 12 participants identified the

decision making process as “arbitrary”; “arbitrariness” was characterized by five participants as the result of arbitrary criteria and for another seven participants as the result of an arbitrary process. “It is an organization where people have been there for a long time – they make some peculiar choices as to what they consider to be important or urgent to work on” (23). Lastly, in terms of process, five participants identified that there was “insufficient process” employed in initiating projects, while seven more participants considered their organizations to have an “unclear process.” The formality of process varied considerably among organizations, with differing degrees of formality, differing levels of responsibility and differing perceptions of clarity being observed within participant descriptions.

A key aspect of “agreement to initiate” is the degree to which “decision recognition” exists; i.e, that there is an appreciation that a decision has been made and awareness what the implications of that decision actually represent. Seven participants identified an environment of “initiation and planning combined,” where initiation, “... starts with the development of the project charter and the project plan, and ends with sign-off” (3). Seventeen participants described an environment of “initiation as planning,” where the initiation of a project was reflected by the process of planning. This was illustrated with examples such as, “We had an acquisition of [name deleted], without a plan, got a bunch of track leads into a room, and said ‘put together a project plan’” (16). Four participants described an environment of “initiation as PMO,” where the formality of the project management office’s processes to get them involved substituted for the process of project initiation. Only five organizations identified an environment of “initiation distinct,” where the process of project initiation was formally separate from other organizational and project processes. Finally, one participant described an environment of “initiation unclear,” where there was no clear process of how projects came to be initiated.

Approach formality. The primary category of “approach formality” defines the formality of the project initiation approach within an organization, including the formality and consistency of the initiation process and the formality of the documentation that is produced. Several sub-categories associated with “approach formality” were identified in interviews, including:

- Documentation formality
- Process consistency
- Process formality
- Process effectiveness

The range of “documentation formality” indicated by participants was diverse. The majority of participants identified that the process of project initiation required some level of business case, although nine indicated that this was a “detailed business case” and another eight participants indicated that a “high level business case” would suffice. Thirteen participants indicated that a “project charter” was required, indicating an alignment with more traditional project management views of project initiation, while another four participants indicated that initiation required a “project plan.” Eleven participants indicated that initiation documents were typically presented in the form of a “presentation,” while another five identified that a “summary document, would suffice. “Does that look like a charter? Unless it is just an IT project, I am not seeing charters used a lot. We don’t have a lot of pure PM-type practices. Would look like a two-page document” (16). For three participants, there was a “high level of variation” in what types of documentation were produced, and at what level of detail. While the majority of participants described some level of documentation, the formality and detail was subject to a great deal of variation, and few participants described initiation documents that aligned with formal project management or strategy practices.

The “process consistency” by which project initiation was managed also varied considerably; this describes how often the process of project initiation is managed the same way within the organization. The majority of participants indicated that the process of project initiation had “moderate consistency,” and described their organization’s environment as one in which the process, “....sometimes varies. A lot of times it is driven by how urgent the initiative has to be implemented, how large it is, what part of the organization is running with it” (21). Four participants indicated that the process is “mostly consistent” and another six participants described the process as “very consistent.” By contrast, another four participants described an initiation process with “low consistency” and six participants identified the process in their organization as being “very inconsistent,” indicating, “We struggle with this. Before charter stage, there

is not a consistent way of getting from an idea to an official project charter” (2). The degree of consistency was highly varied in the participant descriptions, from completely lacking to extremely rigorous.

In terms of “process formality,” varying degrees of rigour and detail were reported in managing the project initiation process. Half of the participants (n=14) described an environment where there was no formal process for project initiation, and another participant stated that the process that existed had no impact, in that everything got approved, indicating, “We don’t tend to not approve projects. Not a lot projects don’t get approved. We have a tendency to approve more projects than we can actually deliver. That tends to be our primary problem” (1). Virtually all of the remaining participants indicated that their process of project initiation only had “some formality.” This included: two participants who indicated that the process in place was not actually well applied; nine who indicated that their process was as yet not fully defined; two who identified that the process was not adhered to fully; one who indicated that the process was flexible and one who suggested that the process that was in place did not produce relevant decisions. Only five participants described an organizational environment where the process of project initiation was “very formal.” Even where a process was described as being consistently applied, it was very frequently not very formal in nature.

The question of “process effectiveness” was an important one for participants. Nearly half described a project initiation environment where the process was “not effective.” For five participants, this was a result of there being no identifiable process. Another five participants indicated that there was a process but that it was not used; one of these commented, “We have a very clearly defined process that we put in place shortly after joining the organization; it probably lasted about three months, and then got thrown out the window. Tried to revitalize the process earlier this year; not a lot of success” (7). Four participants saw their process as not actually resulting in prioritization decisions, while one other participant indicated that the results of the process were not trusted or understood. More than half of the participants described the initiation process as being “somewhat effective,” where one participant indicated that the process tended to result in projects still proceeding to initiation and four participants indicating that the process was often not adhered to. Another two participants described there being a

different process for different projects, and two more participants indicated that they were still working through the introduction of a new process for project initiation. Two participants indicated that the process still had elements of informality, and one participant indicated that the process resulted in compromises that threatened the resulting project, indicating, “I worry about that: Will I have to compromise too much? Will I lose benefits that the organization may want to achieve? Will we compromise user experience because of demands for other features?” (22). Only four participants indicated that they had a “very effective” process of project initiation in place. This is significant, in that while all participants recognized project initiation processes, the vast majority indicated that the one at their organization was not effective or was only moderately effective in supporting the actual initiation of projects.

Decision clarity. The primary category of “decision clarity” establishes the clarity of the project initiation decisions that are made and the alignment of those decisions with the strategic direction of the organization. Several sub-categories associated with “decision clarity” were identified in interviews, including:

- Clarity of doing
- Decision alignment

The “clarity of doing” reflects the degree to which the result of the initiation process is a clear path forward in terms of what has been committed to. Only six participants identified that the initiation process resulted in a “clear plan.” By contrast, 15 participants indicated that the initiation process resulted in a general “direction,” while six participants stated that the result of the initiation process was an “inferred solution.” “They would finalize it – get it underway probably without understanding what the scope implied as far as things like how it should be architected would go. Everyone would nod and agree and start marching” (23). Three participants identified that the project initiation process often produced a project that was “unworkable,” while one participant indicated that in face of uncertainty or hard decisions, the decision making tendency within the organization was to “defer,” holding off on the decision while requesting more information. “We have had instances where hard decisions have had to be made and have required trade-offs, and those decisions tend to get deferred as well” (1). Many participant descriptions indicated that projects at the time of initiation were not

developed to an extent where the organization had a clear picture of the results it intended to obtain.

In response to questions about “decision alignment,” there was a fair degree of diversity in terms of whether respondents felt that initiated projects were in any way aligned with the strategic direction of the organization. Ten participants indicated that projects were matched to strategy in the project initiation process, meaning that as projects were identified they were justified retroactively in terms of how they related to a predefined strategy. “I suppose they all consider the larger government mandate. Does this fit in the government business plan? Which priorities does this assist with? Doesn’t go much beyond that” (4). Only three participants indicated that the identification of projects was driven by the strategic plan of the organization. Three participants indicated that there is a “presumed” link to the strategic plan for initiated projects, while the majority of participants (17) indicated that project initiation was predominantly “reactive to demands.” Four participants indicated that at times, projects would be initiated on an “ad hoc” basis, with one commenting, “Decisions get made on a whimsy – it depends upon the mood what gets initiated” (1). While participants described a theoretical alignment with strategy within many organizations, very few projects seemed to be initiated with a conscious alignment to organizational strategy.

Decision information. The primary category of “decision information” identifies the information that is required and considered during the project initiation process. This includes both information contained within formal documents and deliverables, as well as informally compiled or assessed information.

Respondents demonstrated a comprehensive and diverse number of perspectives on what is required in terms of information to support project initiation. Participants identified the need to “understand background,” “understand goals,” “understand impacts,” “understand lessons learned” on previous projects, “understand success” and “define approach.” The need to “research alternatives” was also identified by eight participants, while two indicated the need to present “external benchmarks,” and one highlighted the need to consider “change management” as part of the initiation process. While this suggests a relative degree of formality in analysis and consolidation of information, twelve stakeholders still indicated that they “want more analysis” of

projects prior to initiation. “We do talk a lot about wanting to do a lot of analysis. In terms of actual time, we take on too many projects as a group. We find that we tend to do less analysis than we should. We are pressured to complete existing projects. We are not always spending enough time at the analysis stage” (26). In short, many participants did not consider the analysis that was done to be sufficient.

Respondents’ perceptions of failure to conduct sufficient analysis were supplemented by their statements that the level and detail of analysis varied depending upon the type of project being conducted. In particular, 13 participants indicated that “rigour depends upon the person” that is sponsoring the initiative, 16 stated that “rigour depends upon the project type” and four participants said that “rigour depends upon [the] urgency” of the project. Such comments suggested that different decision makers within the organizations have different degrees of expectation regarding the information required in choosing to proceed with projects.

The consumption of information in support of decisions also varies considerably. While four participants indicated that they “seek [their] own understanding” of the initiative as part of the initiation process, another four participants indicated that they “rely on others” in determining the viability of a project initiation decision. “[A]part from the knowledge that we bring to the table, we don’t do our own kind of investigation. At least I don’t. I rely on the information in the proposal, and the presenter” (4). As well, 15 participants identified that despite the analysis and information that might be assembled, there is a tendency within their organizations to “commit to solution,” and six participants suggested that any analysis tends to be overridden by “executive imperative.” Nine stakeholders indicated that the decision information served a strategy of “document as justification,” where the analysis served to support a pre-ordained conclusion. Finally, two stakeholders indicated that there was a tendency to “avoid rigour” in the analysis of project initiation decisions. For many participants, the effort to compile analysis and demonstrate rigour appeared to be more an issue of justification than it was a product of considered deliberation.

Decision value. The primary category of “decision value” identifies the means by which the value of potential projects is considered within the project initiation process. This includes the degree to which the value of a project is formally defined and

articulated prior to project initiation, and the degree to which tangible and intangible factors influence the assessment of potential value.

While respondents indicated that in their organizations there was a fairly broad discussion of overall analysis as part of the project initiation process, there was much less emphasis on understanding the value of potential projects. Thirteen participants identified that value is “formally defined” as part of their project initiation process, while seven indicated that it is “informally considered” and six participants described an assessment of project value that was “inconsistent.” “It is probably too finite to say it is just retail projects, but more where projects are customer facing, there tends to be not a lot of scrutiny. That tends to be in the main retail projects. Compliance projects which are a cost burden face a great deal of scrutiny” (1). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, seven participants identified that value was “not considered” as part of the project initiation process within their organizations. Participants would appear to place much less emphasis on considerations of value in determining whether to proceed with projects.

Where value is assessed, perspectives differ on the nature of value that must be demonstrated. Half of the study’s participants (14) indicated that any value that is demonstrated in support of a project must be “tangible” in nature. At the same time, 13 participants indicated that “intangible” value can have a significant influence on project initiation, and two participants indicated that the bias in terms of impact was more firmly on “not tangible” value. For some participants, value itself was reframed, with four participants indicating that the primary emphasis was on being “cost sensitive.” This perspective is demonstrated by the comment, “...if I view this from [our] standpoint, we have been sort of there a couple of times, when we have come to an understanding of the cost, there is usually a quick backing away from it” (19). Measures of value appear to have been regarded with scepticism by many participants, and even projects with good promise were dismissed if the costs were considered too high.

Overall rule environment. The primary category of “overall rule environment” encompasses the system of rules that are employed in governing the project initiation process within organizations. Several sub-categories associated with the “rules” were identified in interviews, including:

- Decision agency
- Influence on rules
- Understanding of rules
- Desired changes to rules
- Explicit rules
- Implicit rules
- Rule consistency
- Rule stability
- Rule emphasis
- Rule effectiveness

The idea of “decision agency” reflects the degree of flexibility enjoyed by participants in working within the rule systems of their organizations. Six participants indicated that they had “no flexibility” in working within the rules; rule adherence was essentially mandatory. For three participants, this was because of the rigidity of process, while for the other three it was predominantly a result of the political environments within their organizations. In reference to organizational rules, one participant indicated, “Probably, I stub my toe once a week on one I didn’t know about” (23). Seventeen participants indicated that they had “some flexibility” in terms of adhering to and working with the rules in their organization—usually because there was some degree of process that they were required to adhere to, and because they recognized others who had political influence over the final project initiation decision. Finally, five participants indicated that they had “considerable flexibility” in working within the rule environments of their organizations. For two, this was because they ultimately defined the rules; one participant was simply willing to work around the rules; and the final two had developed a significant level of understanding of their culture. “Figured out how to work within this culture. It is a relationship-driven organization—if you have the relationship, that is how things get done: Through the back door conversations” (16). There was a broad spectrum of responses provided from participants, from those willing to work around the rules to those that work strictly within them.

In addition to the flexibility people feel they have within their organizations, there is also a question of the “influence on rules.” Fifteen participants indicated that they have “no influence” on the rules within their organization. For three of these, this is a result of striving without impact: “The effort of starting too many projects, working on multiple things at once, is part of that culture. Actually [this is] a battle I’m not winning on behalf of the PMO” (18). Five participants did not exercise influence because they were accepting of the process, while seven participants were accepting of the influence of political forces on the project initiation environment. For ten of the participants, there was an indication that they had “some influence” on the rule system within their organizations, either because of their responsibility for guiding or facilitating improvements (four), their ability to work within the environment (five) or their willingness to work around the existing rules (one). Only three participants indicated that they had “considerable influence” on the rules—two because of their influence over practices, and one because of a high degree of autonomy within the organization. Overall, there was a split between those who felt they could change the environment in which they operated, and those who believed that they could not.

While there was variation in their perspectives on the flexibility of or their ability to influence the rules, many participants felt that they had a solid “understanding of rules” within their organizations. Eight participants indicated that they had a “very good understanding” of the rule systems within their organizations, as a result of their position and influence in defining the rules, their history with the organization, and their confidence in navigating the culture of the organization. In describing their understanding of the rules, one participant responded, “Very well. It’s a requirement. It’s the cost of doing business. You will fail as a senior manager without understanding the rules” (20). A further 12 participants indicated that they had a “good understanding” of the rules, again as a product of the length of time with the organization, as well as their understanding of the culture or their position, and their relative seniority within the organization. Five participants suggested that they had only “some understanding” of the rules within their organization, either as a result of their relative newness to their organization, or relating to their disagreement or frustration with the overall rule system. There were two participants, both external contractors, who indicated that they had “little

understanding” of their organizations’ rule systems, while only one participant suggested that he or she had “no understanding” of the rules. Participants suggested that there was at least moderate and in many cases quite strong understanding of the rules overall in organizations, even among people who have little influence on those rules.

When asked about “desired changes to rules,” a number of different perspectives were offered. Seven participants indicated that they “need more structure,” eight said that they “need more adherence,” and three suggested that they “need more relevance.” In terms of the rule system, four participants suggested “need flexible,” seven suggested “need clearer” and three indicated that the system needs to be able to produce “better decisions.” In attaining this, two participants said of the rules of their organization that the first challenge was that they “need some.” Overall, there was both dissatisfaction and desire for continued improvement identified regarding existing rule systems.

A variety of “explicit rules” were in place to govern the initiation of projects. In all, nine participants indicated that the explicit rules were “clearly defined,” with this clarity being a response to political issues, an espoused expectation or simply a reflection of how projects are actually initiated. By contrast, thirteen participants indicated that there were “minimal explicit rules” within their organization. The underlying themes for this were diverse, and included comments about rules being limited to the expectation of a business case, or the definition of a project, or the commitment that a formal decision would in fact be made. In addition, participants indicated that there were minimal practices, minimal compliance and only general alignment of the rules with overall direction. Finally, six participants indicated that there were “no explicit rules” within their organization governing project initiation. In discussing the explicit rules within their organization, three participants indicated that they are “evolving” and nine indicated that embedded within the rule system was an “expectation of adherence.” “Very important. You need a common field of play so that everyone understands what it is that they need to be providing. If we are going to start evaluating one project against another, [we] need a common understanding” (8). In all, surprisingly few organizations appeared to

have clearly defined explicit rules in place relating to project initiation, and there was a great deal of room for interpretation and movement.

There was a broad array of “implicit rules” that participants outlined regarding the process of project initiation. One of the implicit rules discussed was that “process has value”; nine participants suggested that there was an implicit appreciation of process within their organization, either because of the perception of value associated with having a process, because experts were responsible for the process, or because the process was in fact being adhered to. There was a professed awareness of “standards” within the organization by one participant, and seven participants indicated that “process” was implicit; while it was not articulated or written down, it was understood. “The pitfall is I understand the rules in my own head, but sometimes they don’t get conveyed. Sometimes the problem is that the rules are my rules, and they haven’t been formally adopted within the organization or in the PMO – part of the vision that I have that hasn’t really made its way out yet” (3). There was a much broader implicit understanding of “politics,” with twenty participants highlighting the implications of politics on project initiation; in this context, there was discussion of the need to leverage relationships, exercise influence and work within the culture. Related was the implicit need for “consultation,” which was cited by seven participants. Finally, four participants discussed the level of “autonomy” within the process of project initiation, and nine participants identified the “ability to avoid” process as being implicitly understood. Overall, participant responses suggested that implicit rules have a broader and more comprehensive influence on project initiation than do explicit rules.

One aspect of understanding the rule environment within organizations was a discussion of “rule consistency”: the degree to which the rules as understood (whether implicit or explicit) were actually adhered to. The majority of participants (16) identified that the rules within their organization were “inconsistent,” with reasons for this including cultural differences, inconsistent expectations, silo influences, the existence of multiple processes, political influences, avoidance of processes and a lack of history within the organization. Only seven participants indicated “some consistency” in their rule systems; they felt this was due to a conscious desire to remain flexible, a greater emphasis on implicit rules within the organization, or consistency being limited to only

some aspects of the process. Only five participants indicated that the rule system in their organization was “very consistent”; in all cases, these organizations had a strong explicit process environment in place. “We are very stringent – some might say over the top – but because we are in audit and tax, we have to be” (20). These results suggest that not only were there fewer organizations described as having an explicit rather than an implicit process, but even where they were present the application of explicit rules was low, except in a much smaller subset of organizations.

In discussing the “rule stability” within the organization, four participants indicated there was “no stability” in their organizations; two participants indicated that there was “little stability”; 15 participants identified that there was a “reasonably stable” rule environment; and seven participants declared that the rule environment was “very stable.” Respondents had various perceptions of what caused changes to the rule environment in their organizations. Ten felt that shifts in the rule environment were due to “organization change,” either personnel changes or changes to structure. Another nine participants indicated that “political change” was a significant driver of change, whether as a result of the external or the internal political environment. Nine felt that “process change” was a cause of rule change, and occurred typically in response to continuous improvement, changes to the overall process or lessons learned. As well, “response to problems” was identified by four participants as a cause of changes to the rule system. Additional reasons for change included “sponsor influence” (4), “environmental changes” (1) and “cultural influence” (1). Finally, two participants suggested that there was a tendency to “avoid change,” even where it might be warranted. These reasons for change suggest that even where consistency and effectiveness of processes were identified as being low, participants observed both desire and drivers for change.

The “rule emphasis” describes the degree to which the rule system is “explicit” or “implicit”—i.e., the degree to which it is formally defined or generally understood. For those participants who indicated which emphasis they perceived as present in their organization, there was a large diversity. Three participants indicated that the rule system was strictly “explicit,” and another four suggested it was “mostly explicit” but did have some implicit aspects. Two participants indicated the rule systems in their

organizations were “balanced” between explicit and implicit. Five participants said their rule systems were “mostly implicit” and another nine participants identified theirs as being completely “implicit.” One participant suggested that the emphasis was “neither”: “My answer to that is ‘neither.’ Moving forward by the nature of the environment, neither the implicit social rules or the explicit required rules are sufficient to get projects approved. You need to go out of band for all of these” (6). Overall, the emphasis of their organizations indicated by participants supported the earlier indication that there were fewer explicit rule systems in place than implicit ones.

Lastly, the topic “rule effectiveness” discussed the degree to which the rule system in place helped in providing good project initiation decisions. According to fifteen participants, the rule system currently in place was “not effective.” Respondents said that this was because: there was no rule system in place; the rule system that was defined was not used or was subverted; the rule system was not fully articulated or understood; or the system did not produce decisions that were considered effective. An additional ten participants indicated that the rule system was only “somewhat effective” in their organizations. They suggested that this was due to: a lack of full awareness of the rule system within the organization; the evolving nature of the rule system; political influences on how the rules were applied; differences between explicit and implicit rules; and / or excess scrutiny of projects within the organization. By way of illustration, one participant said, “If the explicit rules are followed then a number of tasks have been completed prior to the PM being assigned. If the implicit rules are followed in initiation then the tasks the PM needs to perform would vary” (21). Finally, only three participants indicated that the rule systems in their organizations were “very effective.” One of these said, “Very stable. Very repeatable. It’s the business we are in” (28). These results suggest that for many organizations the rule systems that were in place governing project initiation were not being used, or were being complied with only to the degree that there was scrutiny and as a result were often being worked around; it is interesting to note that only a few participants felt that the rules that were in place were appropriate and effective.

Initial Conclusions In Exploring Project Initiation

The participant inputs that have been described in this section exhibit a diversity of practices in project initiation, in a broad array of organizations. Participants did not tell the same story over and over again; their responses showed that very different approaches were applied in different organizations, with differing levels of formality and consistency. Some practices were written down, while others were only generally understood. A small number of participants saw the process of project initiation as being very clear, very formal and very much adhered to in their organizations, while another subset suggested that there were no rules about how projects were initiated, and that the presence of some rules might go a long way toward helping the organization to improve how it makes project initiation decisions. These results contributed to a strong level of comfort on my part that theoretical saturation was attained and that the overall findings provided an ample diversity of inputs with which to better explore how project initiation can occur, and what might better improve the initiation of projects in organizations that seek to get better.

Before identifying the implications of the findings of the current study in regard to how project initiation decisions are made, it is of value to briefly revisit the role of “project shaper” as defined by Smith and Winter (2010). As previously mentioned in the literature review, this is one of the first studies that has posited the existence of such a role; however, the relatively small number of cases (three) discussed in that paper raises legitimate questions about whether the role of the project shaper does in fact exist in practice, and the degree to which findings and observations of that paper regarding the project shaper role were relevant. The next section evaluates what the findings from the current study have to offer in better clarifying the project shaper role that Smith and Winter have advanced.

Support For the “Project Shaper” Role

The Craft of Project Shaping

In their article “The craft of project shaping,” Smith and Winter (2010) raised the possibility of a potential role of “project shaper” that was responsible for the stewardship of projects through the “...complex and messy social processes that lead to a project being proposed” (Smith & Winter, 2010, p. 48). The authors conducted a narrative

review of three scenarios from the “Rethinking Project Management” network that they viewed as particularly relevant to the understanding of project initiation, and derived from those scenarios a conceptual framework that comprised six dimensions within which an individual would need to develop skills in order to be an effective and reflexive practitioner in the project shaping role.

This section explores these dimensions in more detail, in order to assess the degree to which the findings of the current study support the existence of a project shaper. It explores whether the shaping role can be recognized as existing in the participant descriptions that have been assembled, and the degree to which the influences identified by Smith and Winter reconcile with the categories of analysis that emerged in the axial coding of the study data that was provided by the participants. It concludes with an assessment of the relevance of Smith and Winter’s conceptual framework to the continued development of the current study.

Reconciling Project Shaping

Smith and Winter (2010) define the project shaping role as one of sensemaking. Referring to the work of Weick (1995), they describe sensemaking as being rooted in identity construction, the interpretation of sensible environments that are social in nature and driven by a plausible understanding of cues within the environment. In the context of project shaping, the role of project shaping is then interpreted as “....those acts performed by individuals to make that form of ‘sense’ that constitutes a new project” (Smith & Winter, 2010, p. 48). The framework that emerged from an analysis of their case narratives comprised six influences on project initiation, identified in the following points:

- Control model of projects
- Tribal power
- Transformation and value
- Enacted reality
- External dynamics – “peripety”
- Shapers’ volition

Existence of the shaper role. Within the current study, as previously noted, the shaper role was identified by all participants as one that existed within their

organizations, if only informally. The role was not necessarily recognized by that name, but all participants stated that it was typical that someone would champion and “shape” the project as it moved through the process from idea to initiation. The role is performed at a number of levels, whether by a sponsor, a project manager or a subject-matter expert. The role can also be fulfilled by more than just one person. The role itself, however, is not one that typically exists within the organizational hierarchy. It is described as being a responsibility that is taken on by someone who is working to get something done, who sees the need for a project to be initiated. “It is typically the role that I play. I hesitate in terms of [using the word] ‘champion’. In owning the assembly of resources and processes, yes, but I am engaging others that are the real champions and business owners of them” (10). Not only is the role of project shaper often not one that is recognized in the structure of organizations, but ten participants identify the role as one that is informal in nature. “It is a typical role, but not an official one. Technically supposed to be the executive champion or business sponsor” (6). Given the informal nature of the role, it can be inferred that there are challenges in its execution; in particular, it may be difficult to understand the skills and strategies by which project shaping can be accomplished.

The following table illustrates the degree to which the categories that emerged in the current study align with the conceptual model as proposed by Smith and Winter:

Table 8 - Comparison of Study Categories With Elements in Smith & Winter (2010)

Category Details	Categories (Current Study)	Elements (Smith & Winter, 2010)	Element Details
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence on the initiation process • Drivers of influence • Other roles with influence 	Ability to influence	Shaper's volition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal influence in the project • Ability and willingness to act
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of decision • Influence of politics • Facilitation of decision process 	Agreement to initiate	Tribal power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of multiple perspectives of the project • Social facilitation & negotiation

Category Details	Categories (Current Study)	Elements (Smith & Winter, 2010)	Element Details
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process consistency and formality • Formality of documentation • Effectiveness of process 	Approach formality	Control model of projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of process • Establishment of appropriate controls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment with organizational priorities • Clarity of direction 	Decision clarity	External dynamics – “peripety”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of external forces • Managing dynamics of change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information produced to support the decision process 	Decision information	Enacted reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of concrete evidence of the project
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of the proposed result 	Decision value	Transformation and value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of an effective solution • Creation of value for stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency within the rule system • Clarity, formality and consistency of the rules • Explicit vs. implicit emphasis of rules • Effectiveness of the rule system 	Overall rule environment		

A comparison of the categories defined within the current study demonstrates that, while not perfectly aligned, there is a clear correlation between them and the elements defined by Smith and Winter. The predominant themes that have emerged from the participants in discussing the process of project initiation broadly intersect with the earlier conceptual framework of the project shaper. In addition to reinforcing the overall idea that a role of project shaper does exist, this also suggests that the initial conceptual development by Smith and Winter is still relevant when we are discussing a larger sample of participants than the three represented in their case studies. However, there is not a direct correlation of terminology, nor is there an attempt to enforce one; the categories in the current study are ones that have emerged from the participant

cases, and—in keeping with the principles of grounded theory—every effort has been maintained to align the terminology used with the concepts that the participants themselves identified. As well, the concepts themselves do not directly align. In part, that is a question of focus; the narratives provided by Smith and Winter are of project managers who were responsible for not just the “shaping” but also the delivery of the resulting project, where the current study very specifically looked only at the process of project initiation that led to an initiation decision, and did not for the most part consider subsequent planning and project management. As well, the role of rule systems in the decision making process was not explored by Smith and Winter. The current study creates a new category of analysis in its exploration of rule systems. This study adds the role of agency, which could in part be included in Smith and Winter’s concept of “actors’ volition” and which appears here as a dimension of the understanding of the rules associated with initiation decisions. Overall, the results appear to provide support for reinforcing and validating the conceptual offering of Smith and Winter.

Constraints and Further Opportunities

Clearly, based upon the analysis to date, it is possible to say that the role of “project shaper” is one that exists within organizations, even though it is most typically not referred to by that term. Whether formally or informally, all participants in the current study recognized and acknowledged that project initiation would normally include the involvement of an individual whose responsibility it was to move the project from idea to inception. As well, the dimensions that were identified by Smith and Winter as pertaining to the role of project shaper align with the categories that have emerged as participants in this study have discussed the the decision making process associated with project initiation. Although the terminology does not align, and the elements have varying degrees of emphasis and manifest in very different ways in different organizations, as we have seen the components of initiation reconcile with the framework that Smith and Winter proposed. While all this is very promising in validating the Smith and Winter framework, however, there is not complete concordance, and some specific elements that appear in the current study that were not identified by Smith and Winter warrant further discussion.

One key aspect in particular that emerges from the current study that did not appear in the discussion by Smith and Winter is the role of rules in the project initiation process. This dimension, which I introduced directly into the data collection process as an area of exploration as a result of insights that I gained during the literature review, is one that was sustained and expanded during the data-collection process. Not only did participants recognize the presence and operative role of implicit and explicit rules in how projects were initiated, they also frequently highlighted these as being different than the espoused processes that they had previously been discussing. The idea of “rules” is a concept that I expanded considerably in later interviews, and the concept emerged as a major dimension of analysis in the current study. What this suggests is that while the conceptual elements that Smith and Winter identified are important, these elements are operationalized and emphasized by an organization’s overall rule environment.

How decision rules are operationalized is another key consideration that is not present in either the discussion by Smith and Winter, or in the preliminary discussion that formed the basis of the current study. While the dimensions that have been identified in this study point to the phenomena that are present in project initiation, and the range of practices that exist within the various categories of data, they don’t explain how project initiation works. They do not as yet provided guidance for the researcher or the practitioner as to how project initiation decisions are actually made, or the critical influences that govern initiation decisions. They do not, in other words, advance a relevant and workable theory of the role of project shaper in supporting the process of project initiation and the making of project initiation decisions. To do this, there needs to be more than just identification of the elements that are perceived as influencing the project initiation process; there must also be an understanding of how these elements interact to either enable or prevent the decision making process associated with project initiation from being effective. The next sections of this study seek to find meaning among the categories that have been identified to date, to understand how individuals do shape the project initiation process, and to advance a theory of individual support for the project initiation process.

Perceptions of Project Initiation

The contents of this chapter highlight the approach and initial findings of the study. The concepts and categories that emerged from the participant interviews were identified and presented fully, illustrating the range of practices and the level of theoretical saturation attained in each category. The categories that emerged as a result of open coding of the participant interviews were contrasted with the findings of Smith and Winter (2010), whose “Craft of project shaping” attempted to map out a role for the project shaper, and to delineate the skills that those taking on the role would require. This comparison identified a concurrence of categories, although there were differences in the terminology used to describe each category. The preliminary analysis also served to expand on the contribution made by Smith and Winter, as it identified the presence of a “project shaper” role—informally if not formally—by each participant, as well as highlighting the role of rule systems in helping to illustrate the dimensions by which the project shaping role is understood, and the influences that enable or impede people from being successful in the role.

While the results presented in this chapter help identify the phenomena that emerged in exploring the project initiation process, and how the more comprehensive results support and align with those of Smith and Winter (2010), this component of the findings only addresses some of the objectives of this study. Let us now return to the research questions we identified at the beginning of this chapter. I have identified how individuals perceive the process of project initiation through a comprehensive review of the codes that emerged from the data collection process. I also have endeavoured to identify what factors might influence those perceptions, through provision of direct quotes and observations from participants, as well as through the synthesis of those codes into larger concepts and categories of meaning. What now remains is to explore more comprehensively the influences on effective decision making, and ultimately to identify the personal and structural influences that shape the making of effective project initiation decisions. These questions are further explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 - Analysis & Theory Development

Introduction

As has already been discussed, the process of project initiation is both complex and lacking in clarity. It lives at the intersection between organizational strategy and project management, and from different perspectives often appears part of one or the other, at times can be argued to belong to both, and occasionally seems to belong to neither. The point where a project can be said to be initiated is not always clear; it can be equally unclear when or whether a decision to initiate a project has, in actual fact, been made.

This research was designed to explore how project initiation decisions are made within organizations. The research particularly focussed on the rule systems that govern project initiation decisions and the influences that individual participants in the project initiation decision process have on applying and influencing those rule systems. The study takes a grounded theory approach, where I have endeavoured to develop substantive theory regarding individual participation in the project initiation process. The result is a framework of project initiation that places the agency of participants at the centre of their involvement in the project initiation process. This framework identifies both personal and structural influences, and how these influences interact in supporting the development of project initiation decisions. The framework also supports understanding how individuals are able to exercise influence within the project initiation process. The result is an overall theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on the effectiveness of project initiation decision making.

The following sections provide an overview of the analysis that was conducted in developing the proposed theory. The first section expands on the findings to explore the core category of “agency” with respect to those supporting the project initiation process. The second section explores the results of the process of selective coding, and the identification of the concepts and categories that influence—and explain the variation within—the core category. Finally, the last section introduces the theory resulting from this study, demonstrating how agency and rule emphasis influence the effectiveness of project initiation decision making.

Agency And Project Initiation

In conducting this analysis, one of the key challenges was identifying a core category of analysis. As already noted, in grounded theory the core category is a single phenomenon that represents the central category of interest (Creswell, 1998). It is a concept which is present within all of the cases, and that has the greatest explanatory power of the categories that emerged in the analysis, and the ability to explain or convey theoretically what the research is about (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Identifying a core concept was complicated and difficult, given the broad range of descriptions and scenarios that were described by participants. There were structural themes that emerged of politics, process and formality that all in some way appeared to be relevant to understanding the cases. The role of participants and their influence also clearly had an impact on an initiation in some cases, but not in all. There were instances where the influence on decision making was predominantly personal; there were also instances where the influence was predominantly structural, and those structural influences were themselves sometimes process-based and in other instances driven politically. What ultimately emerged, after a considerable period of reflection and analysis, was the concept of agency.

Recognizing the influence of agency was complicated by the way in which it was manifested in different contexts. In heavily process-oriented environments, agency was constrained; it was identified as actively being limited based upon the perceived need within the organization to adopt a formal and consistent approach to project initiation. In politically-oriented environments, agency could enhance or compensate for organizational inadequacies or lack of clarity. In other contexts, agency was the sole means by which decisions were actually influenced. While the influence of agency varied, however, awareness of it as a concept—and the degree to which it was utilized or constrained—was constantly present. Agency became the critical concept that weaved through all of the participant descriptions in some manner and form.

In the context of this study, the definition of agency that is being utilized is that proposed by Dietz and Burns (1992) in their discussion of the freedom of choice and range of options that actors have when it comes to engaging with social rules. They suggest that, “The rules known by an actor influence their [sic] behaviour in a given

situation. But this realization of rules into practice cannot be mechanical. Rules must be interpreted to be used in a particular context” (Dietz & Burns, 1992, p. 189). In other words, actors have a range of options when faced with a decision situation, and in exercising agency will interpret the context and the rules that they perceive as being relevant in choosing how they will respond. In exercising agency, they have freedom and flexibility to respond within or work around the rules that are perceived or professed to exist. While the phenomenon described as “agency” by Dietz and Burns was mentioned by some of the participants when they were discussing how projects were initiated within their organizations, it was not universally present. The implication is that agency does not always exist or is not always perceived to be available to participants, and an understanding of how agency manifests or wanes is important to considering how the perceived rules of project initiation are actually interpreted.

Dimensionality of Agency

Within the findings of the study, “agency” is a fully developed construct. Participants described situations where it existed strongly, where it partially existed and where it did not exist. Some participants said that they had considerable latitude to work across the organization, around the rules and outside of the constraints of processes. Other participants indicated that they had some latitude and freedom of choice or expression, but only within narrowly defined or constrained contexts. Finally, several participants described an environment where they felt entirely constrained by the processes and rule systems imposed by their organizations, with little to no latitude for choice or movement. Not only is the described degree of agency very broad, but its implication for project initiation decisions and decision participation is quite significant. To appreciate this significance, it is important to explore more fully how agency is manifested within the project initiation process.

Considerable flexibility. Where participants described having considerable flexibility, or agency, they identified three primary drivers. Participants indicated considerable flexibility within the rule system in situations where they actively influenced the definition of rules, where they were willing to work around the rules, or where they had developed a deep understanding of the organizational culture.

Two participants were in fact responsible for the development of the rules regarding project initiation in their organizations, and therefore also felt that there was considerable latitude to influence, change or at times subvert those rules. One participant indicated, for example,

The pitfall is I understand the rules in my own head, but sometimes they don't get conveyed. Sometimes the problem is that the rules are my rules, and they haven't been formally adopted within the organization or in the PMO—part of the vision that I have that hasn't really made its way out yet. (3)

Those with high levels of agency are also willing to bypass the rules that they impose on others: “We want to create some working proofs to bring staff up to speed, but don't want to go through the formal approval process—because I don't think it's necessary” (17). The strong implication that emerged from both examples was that because they strongly influenced the rules, these participants also had a great deal of flexibility in how they responded to the rules.

The second primary driver of considerable agency was a fundamental and stated willingness to work around the rules. In the view of one participant,

My projects seldom fail. Can usually take the approach that I believe needs to occur to get traction. It often takes a long time to get the initial traction. But I understand how to work with the culture of most of the sites—by nature that is where I started. (6)

This individual's willingness to work around the rules was reinforced by a strong level of perceived autonomy: “I am seen as an iconoclast. It is why they keep me around, but they are also careful how they use me” (6). The implication is that not only was the participant willing to work around the rules, there was a tacit expectation on the part of the organizational executive team that this is exactly what would happen.

The final primary driver of where participants indicated having considerable agency was as a product of having a strong understanding of the culture, and of how to effectively operate within it. Two participants in the study indicated that they had a very strong understanding of the organizational culture and what it took to get projects initiated. In the words of one participant, “I have adapted and learned along the way. Experience and trial and error. Now that I have a level of credibility, what used to take

more effort now takes less” (10). This observation was echoed by a second participant, who indicated, “I have figured out how to work within this culture. It is a relationship driven organization—if you have the relationship, that is how things get done. Through the back door conversations” (16). In this context, relationships, politics and credibility were what enabled initiation decisions to get made, and developing these was key to establishing flexibility.

In all of the above instances, the qualities that underlie the attainment of “considerable flexibility” are personal ones. The participants who indicated a strong level of agency in decision making firmly believed that they had it, and were confident in their ability to make decisions, engage in political negotiations and successfully influence the process of project initiation. The implication was that independent of many of the other conditions that existed within their organizations, the individuals with the most flexibility had the personal influence necessary to be successful.

Some flexibility. Those who had “some flexibility” or agency described decision-making environments where they faced limitations on their ability to influence the project initiation process. Unlike those who indicated that they had “considerable flexibility,” a much larger number of participants indicated having only “some flexibility.” For these participants, there appeared to be two primary forms of constraint: process and politics.

Where there are perceived constraints on process, some level of process is expected to be adhered to. Because some processes are defined, or there are formal expectations regarding some aspects of the project initiation process, these are seen as constraints on the flexibility of individual participants involved in the project initiation process. Speaking of the organization’s rule environment, one participant commented,

Have to follow the explicit ones, but here there are way more implicit ones.

Emphasis gets on implicit, because there is more of them. If I have to bend one or the other, the bias is towards implicit ones. But there are some explicit ones that you know you cannot compromise. Sometimes those are ones that are just de facto requirement. If you don’t do those, you won’t get anywhere. (19)

Another participant offered, “Would have to say the explicit, and the only reason I make the distinction is because those have legal ramifications, policy issues. Knowing they are stated for a specific reason, to cover you and the institution” (25). Among these

participants, while there was still a recognition of latitude within the rule system governing project initiation, there was a view that actions were constrained within the defined and explicit rules, at least with respect to what they encompassed.

The second influence on the limits to participants' agency was a recognition that there were others within the organization who had political influence over the decision. In other words, the participants did not have exclusive autonomy over the initiation process and were subject to both the decisions and also the desires and agendas of other organizational stakeholders. As one participant observed, "In this environment, I can't get into anything but trouble by initiating something on my own, without consensus and agreement of my colleagues" (22). In regard to the influence of politics in the organization, another participant observed, "There is the informal route where you simply lobby the executive and get the approval. You need to go to the more powerful executive if you want that to proceed" (1). In this context, political support at another level of the organization was required in order for the project initiation process to proceed.

While participants were still able to exercise some influence and agency, in the above illustrations it was seen to operate within established constraints, whether those constraints were process-based or political. In these situations there is not an unconstrained level of autonomy, but instead participants need to work within the bounds of their organizations, even though there is some latitude for movement within the bounds themselves. The participants indicating that they had "some flexibility" formed a sizeable group, consisting of seventeen responses. These participants were also located at varying ranges within their organizational hierarchy, from project manager through mid-management to executive, indicating that agency is not simply a product of position within the organization. The majority of participants mentioned having less agency than they would have desired, or than might have been implied by their positions. The ability to exercise agency was therefore not directly tied to the position or level of seniority held in the organization.

No flexibility. While most of the participants indicated that they had some flexibility—and therefore agency—within the project initiation process in their organizations, some participants reported no flexibility in how the initiation process was

conducted. There were two primary influences underlying this situation: the rigidity of process, or the predominance of politics.

In these situations, unlike those where participants had some agency, the process was so rigid that participants did not see any room for manoeuvring or flexibility. The rules were seen as being “the rules,” and participants as a result perceived themselves as having no range of movement within the organization. In one case, there was within the organization a genuinely high degree of rigour, formality and scrutiny regarding the initiation of individual projects. The organizational process set out very explicit requirements for how initiation was to be managed, and how opportunities were to be evaluated and challenged. Despite the participant’s being a member of the executive team, the organization was sufficiently hierarchical and procedural in its operation that the participant perceived little latitude: “There are very explicit rules on how projects should be initiated” (8). The other two participants were more junior in their organizations, and they perceived that the process formally defined and articulated what was required in order for a project to be initiated, and that these guidelines were rigorously adhered to. These participants conveyed no sense or indication that politics was an influence governing these decisions. One participant observed that “The rules would be very strict, and we would be forced to adhere to them. On a project like this, they would not ever not be adhered to” (21).

The second influence on having “no flexibility” is the impact of politics within the organization. In this context, a lack of flexibility arises when the political influence within the organization is seen as being sufficiently strong that participants have no latitude for discretion or agency with respect to project initiation. One participant, despite being an executive, perceived the organization as so hierarchical and political that the individual had both little influence in the process and a strong need to support and serve others who did have political influence: “Can be extremely challenging. As administration, I’m a second class citizen” (22). Of the other two participants, one was lower in the organizational structure, and the other was working in the capacity of a consultant outside of the formal organization chart. Both saw politics as influencing the initiation of projects, and both had a high level of resentment regarding the existence of politics. Because of the political influence, the rules were not seen to be clear and were

perceived to be in constant flux. Speaking of the political constraints, one of the participants observed, “We will be told that this group wants the project to happen. The politics play out, and we are not given any choice in that matter” (26). Because of the strength of the political environment, the ability to exercise agency is seen as nonexistent.

While “no flexibility” was identified as a reality by a much smaller number of participants than those who had “some” or “considerable” flexibility, it was still a significant group within the findings. Moreover, it was not strictly a product of position within the organization—two of six participants who indicated that they had “no flexibility” also identified themselves as executives within their organizations, which in most contexts would imply a great deal more autonomy and agency than they actually perceive themselves as having. These findings also highlight that agency can be constrained by the operation of both process and politics.

Implications of agency. In regard to agency, it was interesting to note that in the descriptions of the different dimensions discussed in the previous section, participants who indicated “considerable flexibility” credited their ability to exercise agency to influences that largely drew upon their internal belief in their own influence and abilities. Those who indicated that they had “no flexibility” primarily ascribed the lack of agency to external forces. Those who identified themselves having “some flexibility” indicated aspects that were both personally influenced and externally constrained. This suggests in part that agency is internally motivated, and also that it can be externally constrained. Given its influence on the project initiation process as observed by participants, understanding the sources of agency and how it is developed is worth exploring in more detail. The following section expands on the relevant insights that have emerged from this study.

Influences On Agency

Given its relatively significant influence on the process of project initiation, it is important to explore the drivers and factors that support the creation—or inhibit the exercising—of agency. While the previous sections discussed the influences of different degrees of agency, what is now necessary is the integration of these perspectives into a single view of the overall influences by which agency is shaped. The insights gained

within this study indicate that the creation of agency is in large part a product of power. The cases in this study show that “considerable flexibility” is a result of a combination of influences that include position, role, expertise and influence. Agency also appears to be a product of personality. The primary influences of agency are illustrated in the following diagram:

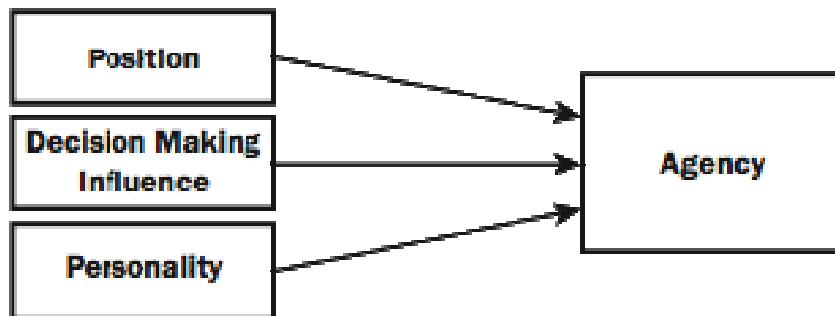


Figure 3. Influences on the development of agency.

Influence of position. One of the influences on agency appears to be that of position. While there is not a strict correlation, there is sufficient indication in the study findings to suggest that a relationship exists. The following table illustrates the study results comparing position and rule agency:

Table 9 - Position vs. Rule Agency

	No Flexibility	Some Flexibility	Considerable Flexibility
Executive	2	1	2
Mid-management	0	11	3
Project Manager	4	5	0

As can be seen in the above table, those participants who indicated “considerable flexibility” in terms of rule agency tended to be at an executive or mid-management level, those with “some flexibility” tended to be at a mid-management or project manager level, and those with “no flexibility” tend to be at the project manager

level. As noted above, this does not comprise a strict correlation: one executive indicated having only “some flexibility,” and two indicated that they had “no flexibility.” As has been noted earlier, these constraints on agency are a product of the political and process environment within the respective organizations, where the individuals do not have—or do not perceive that they have—an ability to influence, work around or adapt the rules. The presence or absence of agency was not necessarily identified as being problematic; it was not necessarily indicated as desirable by the participants that they should have a greater level of agency at this level. The overall results, however, do suggest that the higher in the organization that someone rises, the greater level of agency that they will tend to possess.

Influence of decision making influence. There is also an impact by decision making influence on the promotion of agency. In particular, there appears to be a correlation between the level of involvement in the decision making process regarding project initiation decisions and the level of agency that participants have. The following table illustrates the study results comparing decision involvement and rule agency:

Table 10 - Decision Influence vs. Rule Agency

	No Flexibility	Some Flexibility	Considerable Flexibility
Participate in decision	1	0	3
Input into decision	2	12	2
Recommend	1	3	0
Facilitate	0	1	0
None	2	1	0

As the above table illustrates, there is a relationship between decision involvement and perceived agency particularly for those participants who perceived that they had “considerable flexibility” or “some flexibility.” Those who had “considerable flexibility” either participated in decisions or had input into decisions. Those with “some flexibility” typically either had input into decisions or made recommendations. Those

with “no flexibility” had no input into decisions or had no decision influence, although one participant indicated participation in the decision but felt that they had “no flexibility” in terms of agency within the project initiation process. As well, one participant with “no flexibility” made recommendations in the context of the project initiation process. Overall, however, it appeared that the greater the level of agency within the organization, the greater amount of involvement participants had in the decision making process regarding project initiation.

Influence of personality. As has already been noted, those with the greatest amount of agency in the project initiation process in their organizations were those who perceived themselves as having a considerable amount of personal influence. Interestingly, this appears to also be in part a product of the personal characteristics and underlying preferences of the individual. While this is predominantly a qualitative study, one quantitative component that was inserted into the design was an assessment of personality preferences based upon Jung’s theory of psychological types. The assessment instrument, Insights Discovery, produces numeric results on a six-point scale indicating the relevant preferences that correspond largely to each of the core combinations of attitudinal and rational functions. These are constructed by combining each of the attitudes of extroversion and introversion with each of the rational functions of thinking and feeling. The relationship of attitudes and functions within the Insights Discovery model is illustrated in the following diagram:

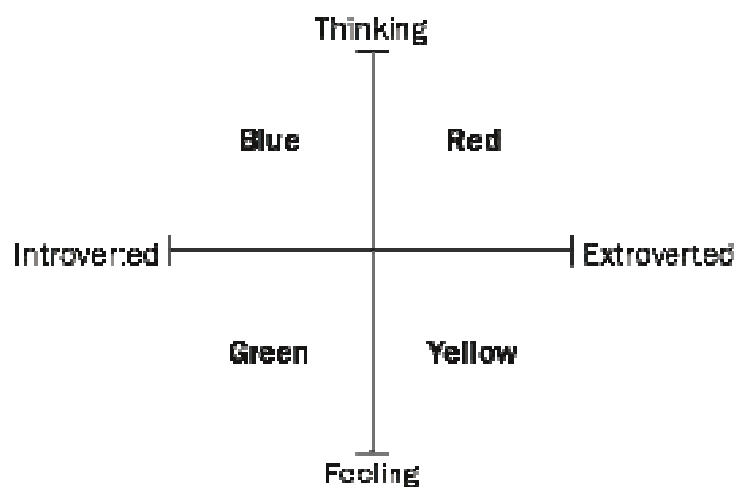


Figure 4. Insights Discovery personality assessment dimensions.

Comparing agency and personality. Comparing the perceived categories of agency with the means of the Insights Discovery scores of the associated participants resulted in observed levels of variation within each level of perceived agency, as well as within each of the Insights Discovery preferences. The following table illustrates the mean Insights Discovery colour scores at each level of agency observed within the study:

Table 11 - Rule Agency vs. Mean Insights Discovery Score

	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red
No Flexibility	4.99	3.61	2.15	2.82
Some Flexibility	3.79	3.79	3.04	2.95
Considerable Flexibility	3.39	2.04	3.18	4.46

As can be observed in the table above, there is a material difference in scores at each level of agency:

- Those who had a higher score for “blue” within the Insights Discovery model (predominantly extroverted and thinking) were much more likely to indicate that they perceived “no flexibility,” and far less likely to indicate that they perceived “some flexibility” or “considerable flexibility.”
- Those who had a higher score for “green” within the Insights Discovery model were more likely to indicate that they perceived “no flexibility” or “some flexibility,” and were much less likely to indicate that they perceived “considerable flexibility.”
- Those who had a higher score for “yellow” within the Insights Discovery model were more likely to indicate that they perceived “considerable flexibility” or “some flexibility,” and were much less likely to indicate that they perceived “no flexibility.”
- Those who had a higher score for “red” within the Insights Discovery model were more likely to indicate that they perceived “considerable flexibility” and much less likely to indicate that they perceived either “some flexibility” or “no flexibility.”

There are two key implications in these findings that are worth highlighting. First, higher levels of agency (and particularly observations of “considerable flexibility”) are more likely to be observed in those who have an extroverted preference, while lower levels of agency (and particularly observations of “no flexibility”) are more likely to be observed in those who have an introverted preference. Second, those who have a thinking preference are more likely to indicate a perceived extreme of agency (Insights “blue” is more likely to perceive only “no flexibility” and Insights “red” is more likely to perceive only “considerable flexibility”) while those who have a feeling preference are more likely to indicate a perceived range of agency (Insights “green” is more likely to perceive “no flexibility” or “some flexibility,” while Insights “yellow” is more likely to perceive “some flexibility” or “considerable flexibility”).

The results of the comparison of agency with those of personality indicated a strong level of individual influence on agency. In addition to the structural influences of position and decision involvement, individual participant personalities appear to strongly shape the degree to which they are likely to perceive themselves as having agency. The tendency of extroverted preferences towards greater levels of agency, and particularly for those who have a more extroverted-thinking (Insights “red”) preference, suggests reinforcement of traits that are common to these preferences. As defined by Jung (1971) and operationalized in Insights Discovery (British Psychological Society, 2009), extroverts tend to have a greater level of optimism, enthusiasm and confidence; in addition, those within an extroverted-thinking preference tend to be strongly independent-minded, goal-oriented, purposeful and driven. Extroverts are more likely to therefore have a greater level of confidence in their ability to make a difference, and extroverted-thinkers are more likely to be independent and to work within their own interpretation of the rules. The tendency of introverted preferences to perceive themselves as having lower levels of agency, and particularly for that of a more introverted-thinking (Insights “green”) preference to do so, is also telling. As defined by Jung (1971) and operationalized in Insights Discovery (British Psychological Society, 2009), introverts tend to place a greater emphasis on traditional approaches, convention and perceived standards; those with an introverted-feeling preference in particular are sensitive to norms, conventions and the perceived expectations of others. Introverts are

more likely to perceive constraints and cautions, and introverted-feelers are more likely to work within the guidelines and prescribed expectations of others. While the characteristics of different personality preferences could certainly be suggested to have moderate alignment with the range of dimensions of agency described in this study, the degree to which this has actually been observed suggests that this influence is significant.

Statistical comparisons. As the Insights Discovery evaluator produces a quantitative component, an ANOVA of agency correlated to the Insights colour scores for the participants within the study was produced to evaluate the degree to which personality influences agency. ANOVA generally assumes a normal distribution, and the analysis here presumes a normal distribution (the scores for personality are typically expected to follow a normal distribution, and are assumed to be symmetrically distributed evenly around the mean) (Cohen, 2008) Despite the fact that the overall number of study participants (n=28) is typically too small to support statistical analysis, and therefore the relative power of the results is comparatively low, statistically significant results were nonetheless obtained within this study. Given that, even with this small sample, some statistical significance was observed in relating personality preference to agency, it was felt that this was worthy of inclusion. The results are illustrated in the following figures.

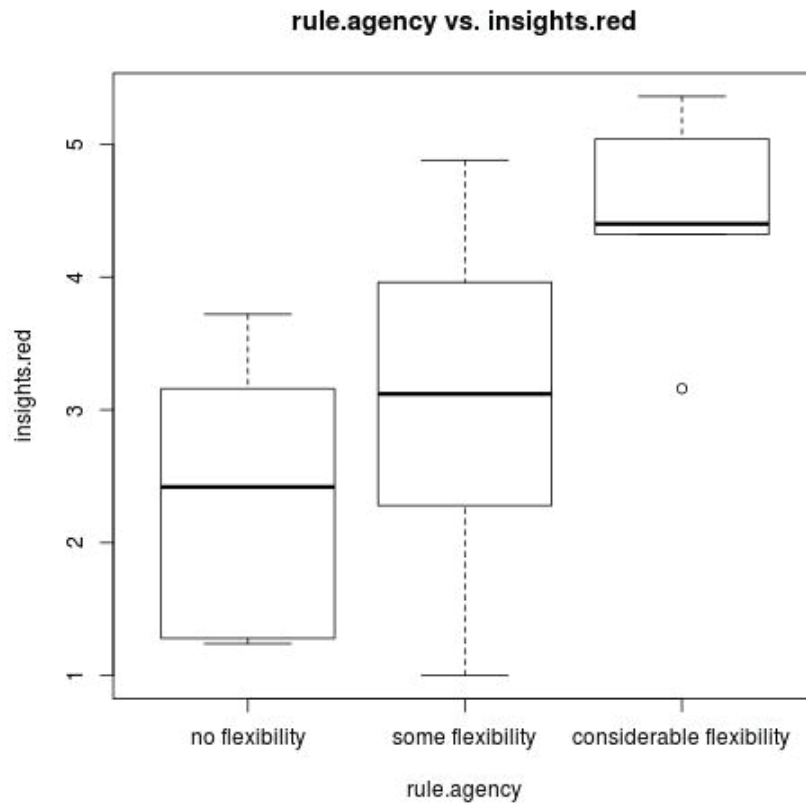


Figure 5. Rule agency vs. Insights red score.

While a multiple comparison of means does not show a statistical significance between “no flexibility” and “some flexibility,” there is a statistically significant difference at a level of $p=.05$ between “no flexibility” and “considerable flexibility” ($p=.0127$). Those indicating a high level of agency in their organizations are far more likely to have a strong preference for Insights “red.”

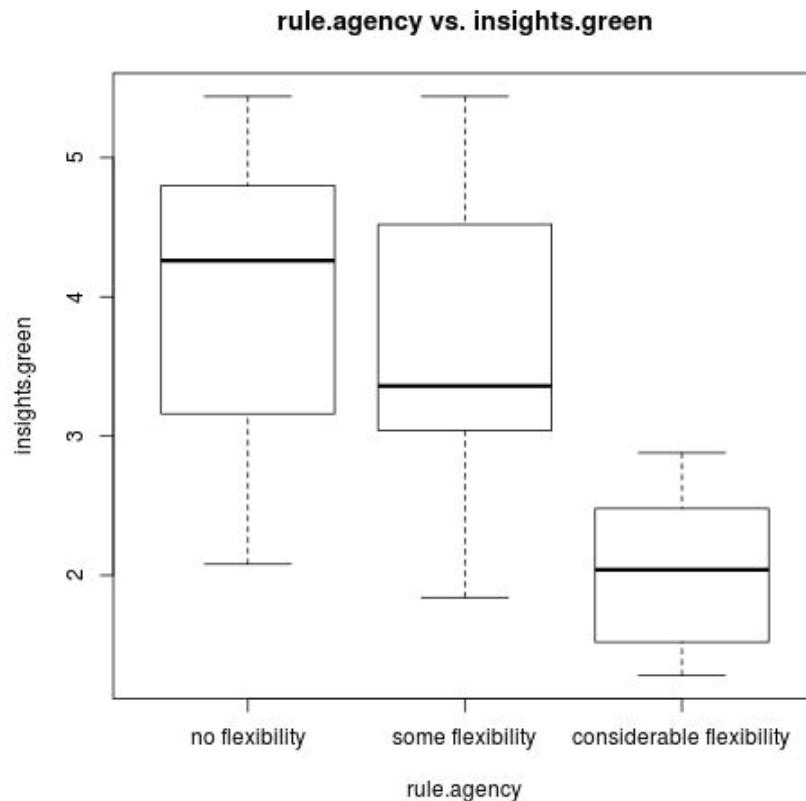


Figure 6. Rule agency vs. Insights green scores.

In addition to the results for Insights “red,” there is also a significant result for Insights “green” scores, which is the opposite preference of Insights “red.” Again, there is no statistically significant result using a multiple comparison of means for “no flexibility” and “some flexibility,” but there is a statistical difference for the comparison of both “no flexibility” and “considerable flexibility ($p=.0113$) and “some flexibility” and “considerable flexibility” ($p=.0133$). Even with a small sample size, these results continue to support a correlation between agency and personality. Participants indicating a high level of agency in their organizations were far more likely to have a low preference for Insights “green,” and conversely those with a high preference for Insights “green” were likely to indicate a lower level of agency, where they perceived no flexibility to influence the rule system of the organization.

Implications of influences on agency. The results discussed above provide significant reinforcement for the more general observation that perceptions of

“considerable agency” are correlated with a sense of internal belief in the power and influence of individual participants. Those who were higher in the organization chart, those who were more involved in the process of making project initiation decisions, and those who indicated extroverted—and more particularly extroverted-thinking—personalities were more likely to indicate high levels of agency (as indicated by the term “considerable flexibility”). Those who were lower in the organization chart, who indicated less influence on the process of decision making, and who demonstrated introverted—and more particularly introverted-feeling—personalities were more likely to indicate low levels of agency (as indicated by “no flexibility” or “some flexibility”). This provides strong reinforcement for the idea that agency is in part internally driven, and is a product of the sense of power, influence and autonomy of the individual that is exercising agency.

Test For Alignment Of Agency

Given the influence of agency on project initiation decisions, it is useful to understand the degree of agency that is actually being described and perceived by participants. Dietz and Burns (1992) suggested that four criteria need to be demonstrated in order to attribute agency to a social actor:

- the agent must be able to “make a difference” in exercising some sort of power over the situation;
- the agent must be acting with intention in the situation;
- the agent must have free play, meaning a range of possible actions, in a given situation;
- the agent must be sufficiently reflexive to monitor the effects of their actions and be able to adjust their rule systems in response to previous actions.

In the context of the above criteria, arguably only those study participants who indicated “considerable flexibility” could be genuinely considered to be executing agency. Those participants who indicated “some flexibility” had some level of agency, but arguably there was less emphasis on at least the first and third criteria: they had less of a perception that their actions had impact, and felt they had a more constrained field of possible actions from which to choose. Those participants who indicated that they “no flexibility” did not meet any of the criteria; they did not indicate an ability to

make a difference, they did not see that they had the ability to act with intent, they viewed their actions as constrained, and they perceived the rule system to be prescribed. While the concept of agency is strongly present in the findings, therefore, it is in the context of varying degrees of agency rather than an absolute understanding of the presence of agency. Some participants can be said to have fully operationalized the concept of agency as proposed by Dietz and Burns, others only exercised partial agency, and some perceived themselves as having no influence or flexibility in their actions at all. Given this range of practices within the domain of “agency,” therefore, there is a need to understand how different degrees of agency are in fact operationalized, and what constitute the other influences on project initiation decisions.

Remaining Questions Regarding Agency And Project Initiation

The analysis thus far has explored the influences of agency on project initiation, the degree to which participants indicated that they had flexibility and the ability to influence the rules of project initiation, and the actions that they took in interacting with those rules. A number of questions still remain, however, regarding the influence of agency on project initiation:

- Why do some participants with executive power not exhibit agency?
- Why do some rule environments seem not to require agency?
- Where does agency influence decision and rule environment?
- Why are there scenarios where agency does not seem to have an impact?

The following section reflects further on the project initiation decision process, exploring the additional significant categories that emerged from the analysis and appeared to intersect with the central, core category of “agency.” It provides a more comprehensive understanding of how project initiation decisions were made within the participant organizations, and how the concept of “agency” influenced and interacted with other key concepts identified by the participants.

Analyzing the Influences on Initiation Agency

In addition to the identification of the core category of agency, it is necessary to explore those other concepts and categories that relate to and influence the core category. The process of selective coding involves the identification of those concepts that most directly influence the central phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Selective coding

is a process of identifying the major categories that fit within the larger framework to build an overall story, but a story that is constructed from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This section addresses identification of the additional concepts and categories that influence the exercise of agency within this study.

In exploring and endeavouring to identify those concepts that most directly contribute to understanding the central concept of agency, a number of additional constructs appeared to have a significant influence. These constructs would seem to explain how agency is exercised, the influence that agency has on the processes of project initiation decision making, and the degree to which these processes appear to be effective. In particular, in this section the influence of process effectiveness and role effectiveness and their influence on decision effectiveness in relation to agency are evaluated, and the underlying influences on establishing process effectiveness and role effectiveness are explored.

Framing the Impacts of Agency on Initiation Decisions

As was pointed out during the discussion of core-category identification, in the study there were instances where the influences on project initiation decisions were predominantly personal, and also instances where the influences on initiation decisions were largely structural. Structural influences were at times process-based, and in other instances more affected by political factors. While the presence or absence of agency was influential in all instances, the manner in which agency was exercised had a large degree of variation. We now turn our attention to the third research question posed in this study: “What are the perceived influences on decision making process effectiveness?”

To address the factors that influence decision making effectiveness, it is necessary to establish those instances where project initiation decision making approaches are perceived as being effective, regardless of the constructs and concepts that might be responsible. Then there is a need to define those approaches that are observed to result in decision making success. Finally, we must articulate how those approaches relate to the core category of agency. What will result is an understanding of the major concepts that influence decision making success. These major concepts are illustrated in the following diagram:

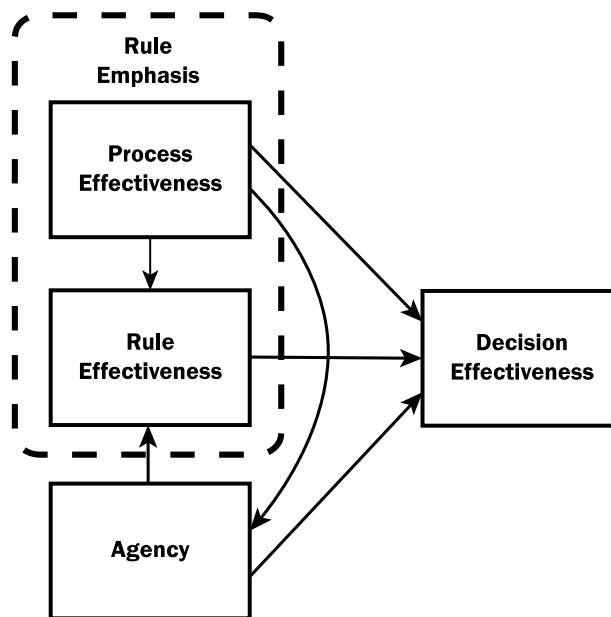


Figure 7. Major conceptual influences on decision effectiveness.

To explore the conceptual influences, the following key considerations will be discussed:

- How decision effectiveness in the context of this study has been assessed and evaluated.
- How structural aspects of the organization are perceived to influence decision effectiveness.
- How personal aspects, and specifically agency, are perceived to influence decision effectiveness.

Defining decision making effectiveness. Assessing the presence of decision effectiveness requires first establishing a means by which the effectiveness of decisions is assessed. In the current study, determination of decision effectiveness was made by the researcher, who comprehensively assessed the decision making environment described by each participant, and the degree to which there was evidence that the environment (including the participant's involvement within the environment) produced effective decision results. Similarly to other assessments of effectiveness within this

study, a scale was used that included “not effective,” “somewhat effective” and “very effective.” The resulting assessment provided a guide by which to evaluate which concepts did ultimately influence decision effectiveness.

Very effective decision environments. In order for me to rate the decision making environment as being “very effective,” there needed to be clear and compelling evidence in participant reports that the process being described consistently led to good project initiation decisions. Some statements that supported a “very effective” rating included observations around structural components, such as:

We have specific policy, specific process, and we underscore our process. We have been working on it significantly to make it less bureaucratic. We have streamlined it as appropriate. Looking at value, risk and independence. It is pretty explicit and pretty well followed. (20)

In highly rated environments, the overall process in place was described as being adapted to the context of the organization, with participants expressing high levels of satisfaction that the process was relevant and appropriate. A participant said, for example, “Following our system will lead you to good decisions” (28). For other participants, effective decisions were a product of their personal influence:

For me as a sponsor, when I am sponsoring, I expect that the methodology is followed. I will go through it step by step, because I believe I need to lead by example, and because I’ve been trained in the discipline—I have a level of awareness that many of the other folks don’t have. (3)

As well as personal levels of understanding of the process, understanding the culture and politics characterized the ability to successfully influence results; in the words of another participant, “I have figured out how to work within this culture. It is a relationship driven organization—if you have the relationship, that is how things get done. Through the back door conversations” (16). Either through structural capabilities or personal influence, a small number of participants were able to demonstrate that they were able to consistently support getting project initiation decisions produced, and that the decisions that resulted were effective and appropriate.

Somewhat effective decision environments. Where I assessed the decision making environment as only “somewhat effective,” the evidence suggested that decision

making was inconsistently effective. In these instances, participants indicated that some effective project initiation decisions were produced within the environment they were describing, but that this was not always the case. Sometimes, effectiveness was compromised by political conflicts: “If we are getting a negative reaction, we would change the approach. It would start to affect how to determine what kind of schedule was reasonable and what kind of energy required from senior management in order for this to happen—to provide support, to read the riot act, to put resources in” (9). Another participant suggested, “You also have individuals that do the same thing—others higher up in the organizational hierarchy. They can sometimes usurp initiation of other projects that might be a higher priority” (5). Observations about the quality of resulting solutions also reflected solution compromises:

Ultimately I have to say ‘we have to do something; we can’t do nothing.’ So initiation is an act of consensus politics, trying to work with all parties to say if it’s not 100%, then doing 75% is better than nothing. (22)

The expectations within organizations can also be arbitrary, with another participant indicating, “You do run into the willy-nilly rules. You ask, ‘Why am I doing this?’ And the answer is ‘Just do it’; or, on other occasions, ‘You don’t have to do it this time.’ A lot of those get driven depending upon who the sponsor is—who is bringing it to the table, how fast they are driving it, if funds are coming from their budget” (25). While compromises and challenges exist within these “somewhat effective” environments, there is evidence that the initiation process does produce results, even where those results are not always optimal.

Ineffective decision environments. Where I assessed the decision making environment as “not effective,” there were material disconnects indicated in participant descriptions that indicated few decisions occurred effectively within the organizations. These disconnects may be a product of genuinely ineffective capabilities, or may occur between perceived and desired capabilities on the part of participants. The underlying evidence, however, provided strong indications that the decision making environment was inappropriate. Some problems included lack of decision making capacity, with one participant indicating,

We have one or two projects that are adequately resourced. When I say 'adequately resourced,' they are consuming more than 80% of our human capacity, which means the other 15 projects are really struggling, almost going backwards. (1)

Participants from other organizations mentioned an inherent lack of planning in the context of initiation: "If we are told to do something, then we proceed to action. We give a wild guess—if it needs to be done in six months, we'll get it done in six months. There is little analysis or research or understanding of what we were told to do in the first place" (2). Politics are also described as having significant influence in undermining the decision making process: "Politics are exercised through 'you will take on the project.' We will be told that this group wants the project to happen; the politics play out, and we are not given any choice in that matter" (26). Politics can result in previous decisions being countermanded; for example, "Not only can there be a lack of agreement, but there can actually be agreement and we can do the prioritization, and then a week goes by and the same director then says they 'want to revisit that decision.'" The result is that it turns the whole thing into a turmoil" (18). Project initiation decisions can also be described as being almost entirely arbitrary: "There is no formality. In terms of approval, that would be an executive saying 'I want a PM to do this project.' From a request perspective, that's how the request would come in" (7). The largest number of participant cases in the study were, for the various reasons described above, identified as having a "not effective" decision environment.

Rule system emphasis. An important consideration in understanding the rule system is the emphasis placed on an explicit versus an implicit orientation. As previously noted, there were some participants who, in describing structural influences, identified environments that were largely process-driven, while others were described as more political in nature. Where the emphasis is largely process-driven, the rule system is in essence driven by the overall process environment. Where the emphasis is largely political, the rule system effectiveness has the greatest influence and the process environment is much less evolved. Understanding the emphasis of the organization, and the degree to which it is implicitly and explicitly focussed, is therefore a necessary determinant of rule system emphasis. The rule emphasis is not an

influence on decision effectiveness, but it is an orienting choice as to which type of rule system is in place.

The following table illustrates the split in emphasis between those organizations having an explicit or implicit focus within their rule system:

Table 12 - Breakdown of Rule Emphasis Among Cases

Rule Emphasis	# Participants
Implicit	17
Explicit	11

Individual influences on decision making effectiveness. The individual influences on decision effectiveness are mediated through the exercise of agency. Where agency is seen as contributing to decision effectiveness, it is through participants' perceived flexibility and capacity to act, and their willingness to do so outside of or despite the structural elements (the processes or rule systems) that might exist. The exercising of agency may operate independently, or in concert with the rule system of the organization, to influence decision outcomes. It can be exercised in environments with an explicit emphasis as well as organizations that have more of an implicit emphasis. The orientation of implicit versus explicit also has an impact on the manner in which agency is exercised.

Agency influence in explicit environments. The following table demonstrates the relationships between agency and decision effectiveness in organizations with an explicit rule emphasis:

Table 13 - Agency vs. Decision Effectiveness (Explicit Emphasis)

Agency	Decision Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
No Flexibility		1	1

Agency	Decision Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Some Flexibility	1	2	3
Very Flexible			3

Comparing agency and decision effectiveness produces what initially appear to be inconsistent results when comparing process effectiveness and decision making, for those organizations that have an explicit focus. In three organizations, the level of agency was described as being “very flexible” and the decision environment was deemed “very effective.” At the same time, a number of other organizations’ decision environments were rated as “very effective” where the agency of the participant was perceived as having “no flexibility” and “some flexibility.” In these instances, process is seen as providing a better explanation of what is determining decision effectiveness; this issue is discussed in further detail in the next sub-section, “Structural influences on decision making effectiveness.” This also highlights another aspect of the relationship diagram that preceded this section: while agency did not influence process effectiveness, there was a constraining relationship between process effectiveness and agency. In those cases where the process effectiveness was seen as being “very effective,” the perceived agency of the participants was lower, and specifically acknowledged as being less of a focus. The result is that process environments that are characterized as being “very effective” appear to have a negative influence on the perception of agency. The overall implication is that agency appears to positively support decision effectiveness in contexts of lower process effectiveness, and is constrained in contexts of higher process effectiveness.

Agency influence in implicit environments. The following table demonstrates the relationships between agency and decision effectiveness in organizations with an implicit rule emphasis:

Table 14 - Agency vs. Decision Effectiveness (Implicit Emphasis)

Agency	Decision Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
No Flexibility	4		
Some Flexibility	7	4	
Very Flexible			2

Comparing agency with decision effectiveness in implicit environments produces a much more demonstrable link between the two concepts than it did in explicit situations. Here, a clear relationship exists between increasing levels of agency and increasing levels of decision effectiveness. In the study, there were a number of organizations in which the decision environment was seen as “not effective,” as discussed earlier, even in the face of agency that was characterized as having “some flexibility.” This demonstrates that while agency can be a factor on its own in influencing decision effectiveness, it is not the only factor to have this influence. As in explicit environments, structural influences within the organization can also have a determining influence in decision making effectiveness. The implication is that agency has a positive influence on decision effectiveness, particular at greater levels of flexibility, but in instances of moderate agency, organizational factors may still have a greater influence than agency.

Structural influences on decision making effectiveness. Where there are structural influences on decision making effectiveness, those influences are most directly determined by the effectiveness of the rule system in place. As was noted in the earlier discussion on identifying the concept of agency as the core category, this realization emerged only after I wrestled with the reality that some decision making environments as described by participants were structurally influenced, while others were indeed personally influenced. It was only through stepping back and recognizing

the relationships that also existed between those structural aspects and agency that the core category was able to be confirmed.

Process effectiveness. The influence of process effectiveness is relevant for those organizations that have an explicit rule emphasis. The initiation of projects is associated with adhering to a defined process, to whatever degree of formality that process exists. The presumption in these contexts is that the more effective the process, the more effective are the resulting project initiation decisions. The following table illustrates the degree to which the process effectiveness within organizations where there is an explicit emphasis is associated with identified decision effectiveness:

Table 15 - Process Effectiveness vs. Decision Effectiveness (Explicit Emphasis)

Process Effectiveness	Decision Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Not Effective	1		1
Somewhat Effective		3	2
Very Effective			4

As illustrated in the table, there is a significant and fairly clear, although not exclusive, association between process effectiveness and the resulting decision effectiveness. In general terms, there is a fairly linear relationship between increasing levels of process effectiveness. However, as there are instances where a decision environment is rated as "very effective," even though the process is rated either "not effective" or "somewhat effective." In exploring these specific instances, it becomes clear that the mediating influence on decision effectiveness is not process effectiveness; it is the agency being exercised by the participant outside of the process environment. The four organizations with a decision effectiveness of "very effective" and a process effectiveness of "very effective" are the same four organizations identified in the agency discussion as having "no flexibility" or only "some flexibility." This illustrates why there is no influence indicated in the relationship diagram of agency having a positive influence

on process effectiveness; the agency of the participant is not seen to be changing the process or enhancing its effectiveness, but instead is enabling the participant to work outside of the process and influence the decision effectiveness directly. The result is that the more effective the process, the more effective the decision, but where ineffective process exists agency may play a compensatory role.

Rule effectiveness. The influence of rule effectiveness is most relevant for those organizations that have an implicit rule emphasis. In these contexts, the rule environment is based upon general understanding, conventions and “tribal knowledge.” The means by which project initiation is supported is the result of political emphasis more than understanding of the formalized process. The presumption in these contexts is that the more effective the implicit rule environment of the organization, the more effective are the resulting project initiation decisions. The following table illustrates the degree to which the rule effectiveness within organizations with an implicit rule emphasis influences the identified decision effectiveness:

Table 16 - Rule Effectiveness vs. Decision Effectiveness (Implicit Emphasis)

Rule Effectiveness	Decision Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Not Effective	10	1	2
Somewhat Effective	1	3	

The table illustrates that there is a relatively clear and direct relationship between rule effectiveness and decision effectiveness. In those contexts where the rule environment is perceived as “not effective,” the decision effectiveness is also predominantly seen to be “not effective,” and in those contexts where the rule environment is perceived as being “somewhat effective” the decision effectiveness is also predominantly identified as being “somewhat effective.” There are again some noteworthy exceptions to review. First, there are instances where the decision effectiveness is described as being “very effective” where the rule effectiveness is

described as “not effective”; in this instance, the influence of agency is once again the determinant, not the rule system. The two organizations identified here were those in which the agency of the participants was described as being “very flexible” in the above discussion of personal influences. Second, there were no rule environments that were described as being “very effective”; at best, the rule environment on its own in the cases observed in this study was “somewhat effective” and its corresponding decision effectiveness was also seen as only “somewhat effective.” The implication is that rule effectiveness within organizations with an implicit emphasis is only part of the influence on decision effectiveness, and agency as an augmenting influence is also required in instances where decision effectiveness is high.

Assessing agency and decision effectiveness. As has been illustrated in the above discussion, agency was present as an influencing factor in all of the cases observed within this study. There were instances in which participants exercised agency exclusively in influencing project initiation decisions. In organizations with an explicit orientation to project initiation decisions, agency can augment less effective processes; at the same time, agency is constrained in instances of very high process effectiveness. In organizations with an implicit orientation, the rule system on its own was not seen as sufficient to fully influence decision effectiveness, and as a result agency was observed as augmenting the rule system in instances of very high decision effectiveness. While the influences on developing agency have already been discussed, what remains to understand is the underlying drivers on process and rule effectiveness.

Exploring the Influences on Process Effectiveness

Process effectiveness influences decision effectiveness in those organizations with an explicit orientation. The process defines the rules and expectations of how project initiation is managed, at varying levels of formality and consistency. Some organizations that arguably have an explicit orientation still have very little in the way of process, and correspondingly are perceived as being largely ineffective; at the same time there are organizations that have processes that are firmly established and are seen as being very effective. The influences on process effectiveness are seen to be those of process formality, process consistency, decision process clarity and the drivers

by which personal influence is exercised by participants, as illustrated in the following diagram:

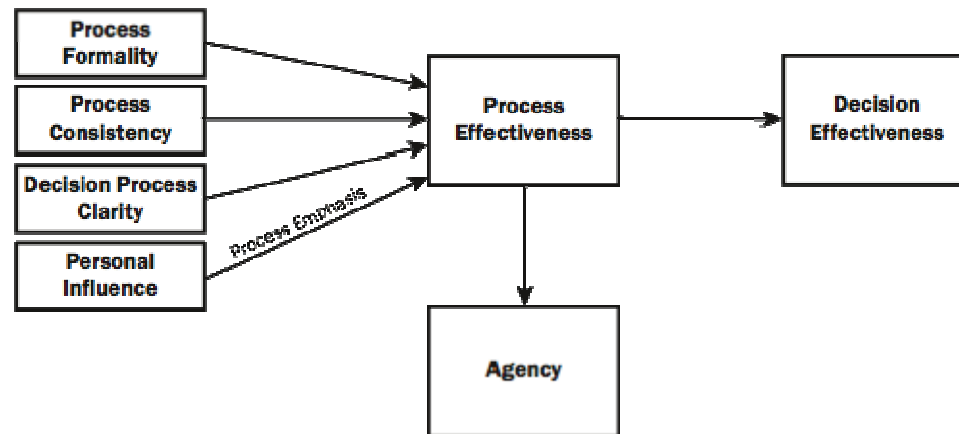


Figure 8. Influences on developing process effectiveness.

Process Formality and Consistency. Formality and consistency of initiation processes emerged as two separate concepts within the study that appear to interact together and have a strong influence on how projects are actually initiated. Within the study, participants defined a broad range of formality and consistency in the practices by which projects are initiated. Some organizations appear to have virtually no process, and a great deal of inconsistency, while others have an extreme level of formality and consistency in how they assess project opportunities. Within organizations that have explicit rule environments, the processes in place essentially define the rules, establishing the basis of rule emphasis as explicit rather than implicit. There also appears to be a relationship between the degree of formality and consistency of process and the degree of agency that is perceived and exhibited by participants in initiating projects.

In the discussion of formality and consistency by participants, what is described varies considerably. Although “process formality” and “process consistency” emerged as two separate concepts in the study, they are strongly related to each other; however, this is not to imply that they vary together in lockstep. Formal processes were not consistently adhered to in participant organizations, and other participants cited consistency around relatively informal processes: “The process is fairly consistent in terms of how it works, it just isn’t formal” (7). There is, however, a fairly strong influence

between the formality and consistency of the project initiation process and the relative emphasis (explicit vs. implicit) of the rule environment within the organization.

A relatively small number of participants described an initiation process that was “very formal” and “very consistent” and those organizations were far more likely to have an “explicit” initiation process in place. In this context, the process is rigorously defined and expectation of adherence is high: “Very. We have tools, processes, and policy. Dictates thresholds, decision making authority and independence” (20). In those organizations that are described as being very formal and consistent, there also does not appear to be a significant perception that the process is inappropriate or stifling; rather, it is seen as producing value: “I think our culture has changed to the point that all of our divisional executives buy into the notion that project rigour is required to get anything significant done. If they see it is going to impact their area one way or the other, then they are good at participating” (4). While the process is adhered to, and agency as a result is constrained, there is a perception that the process as managed is effective and appropriate.

Where there is less formality in the process and less consistency in the process, there is a much greater likelihood of the process being perceived as inappropriate or not producing effective results. In discussing lack of formality, participants describe an environment where there are multiple paths to project initiation: “We have it formally defined, but I would say that more than half of projects initiated in our group don’t go the formal route” (1). Lack of formality also appears to be much more likely to result in situations where politics influence the operation of the decision making process:

Different decisions are made in different ways. We don’t have a formal process—sometimes projects are initiated because someone says so. Because they are high enough on the totem pole, now we are doing it. (5)

A lack of consistency in process also results in challenges in managing the project initiation process, as reflected by one participant who commented, “Not very. Want to say half and half, but not sure that is right. Think organization does the best they can in terms of planning, but we don’t plan in advance” (13). This approach again results in multiple paths that are available to project initiation: “A lot of times it is driven by how urgent the initiative has to be implemented, how large it is, what part of the organization

is running with it” (21). Lack of formality and lack of consistency in process correlate with a much greater range of approaches by which projects are initiated, as well as lack of clarity in how the process itself works.

Formality and consistency of process is not directly tied to having an explicit rule environment in place. While those organizations whose participants indicated high levels of formality and consistency were more likely to have an explicit rule system, those organizations described as having less formality and consistency may be either explicitly or implicitly focussed. Depending upon the focus, the influence of process versus politics is seen to vary, as do the causes of perceived constraint around agency. Organizations described as having more implicit rule systems are more likely to have any process ignored, and the constraints on agency are more likely to be attributed to politics; those organizations described as having more explicit rule systems are more likely to be attempting to reinforce the process, while still being constrained by lack of adherence, but are more likely to view constraints on agency as being a result of process. While the results are the same—constrained agency and flexibility, and frustration with failure to adhere to espoused principles—the underlying drivers leading to constraints and frustration trace back to different sources.

The following table demonstrates the relationship between process formality and process effectiveness for those organizations that have an explicit emphasis on project initiation:

Table 17 - Process Formality and Process Effectiveness (Explicit Emphasis)

Process Formality	Process Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Little Formality	1		
Some Formality	1	5	
Very Formal			4

There is a clear relationship demonstrated between the level of formality of the process and the perceived effectiveness of the process. Where there is a progressively higher level of process formality, there is also a correspondingly high level of process effectiveness. The implication is that where organizations have an explicit rule emphasis, the level of formality of that process has a direct and positive relationship on process effectiveness.

The following table demonstrates the relationship between process consistency and process effectiveness for those organizations that have an explicit emphasis on project initiation:

Table 18 - Process Consistency and Process Effectiveness (Explicit Emphasis)

Process Consistency	Process Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Low Consistency		1	
Moderate Consistency/ Mostly Consistent	2	3	
Very Consistent		1	4

While there is also a demonstrated relationship between the level of consistency of the process and the perceived effectiveness of the process, it is less definitive than that for process formality. Where the level of process consistency is “very consistent,” the process effectiveness is in almost all instances seen as “very effective.” The organizations where process is described as “somewhat effective,” all of which had “some formality,” vary in consistency from “low consistency” to “moderate consistency” to “very consistent.” The organizations described as having process effectiveness of “not effective” are both still described as being “moderately consistent,” even where they vary in formality. The implication is that those organizations that are very consistent also appear to have very effective process, but that lower levels of effectiveness and formality have more varying levels of consistency.

Decision process. The decision process defines the mechanics behind how the actual decision of whether to proceed with a project or not is made. As in the case of the actual initiation process, a great diversity of practices in the process of decision making were described by participants. In some organizations, the decision process is clear, formal and broadly understood. In other organizations, the process of arriving at decisions was described as arbitrary and unclear. The clarity of the decision process appears to have an influence on the broader process environment, and the degree to which those processes are seen as being effective. Decision process also appears to influence the overall level of agency that participants perceive themselves as retaining.

The largest influence described by participants was where there was a lack of clarity or visibility around how the decision making process worked within their organization. Where the process was clear, regardless of whether the decision was made by a board, an executive team or a single executive, participants did not perceive there to be a significant issue or problem. There was typically simple acceptance of the decision making process as it existed and was practised: “The decision is always the [head of the organization]. We make recommendations that we think it is a good fit, but ultimately is the [head of the organization’s] decision to proceed or not” (8).

An “unclear process” or a process seen as “arbitrary” is perceived as having a much greater level of impact on the decision making process. Not only the process, but also the criteria that must be met in presenting a project for potential project initiation, can be misunderstood: “I’m not sure the basis on which the decision would be made. I would hope it would be made based upon how well the proposed effort would meet with their requirements, but can’t be sure” (23). Some participants extend descriptions of this arbitrariness and uncertainty to an open question about what is required for projects to in fact be initiated. One participant, describing the failure to adhere to the defined decision process, said,

At the moment, while we put up a quarterly paper with all of the prospective investment opportunities on the table, over the last twelve months we haven’t had one of those single projects approved. During the course of the intervening months other decisions have been made that preclude us proceeding with any of the projects that have gone the formal route. (1)

The consequences described by those participants with an unclear or arbitrary process is that there is no clarity on how, when or on what criteria an initiation decision will proceed.

As noted, where organizations were described by participants as having a clear decision making process—regardless of the actual nature and mechanics of that process—the participants did not indicate issues with the process and broadly describe acceptance of the process in place; on the other hand, those who described an unclear and arbitrary process reported significant issues in supporting the initiation of individual projects or navigating the overall environment of the organization. The consequence is a process that is seen as being “not effective.” Participants also indicated perceiving little flexibility or agency where the decision making process is “not effective,” which resulted in their perceiving little flexibility or autonomy in being able to compensate or work around the inadequacies that existed in the decision making process.

The following table illustrates the relationship between decision making process formality and process effectiveness:

Table 19 - Decision Process Formality vs. Process Effectiveness (Explicit Emphasis)

Decision Process Formality	Process Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Arbitrary/Unclear Process	2	2	
Some Process		3	4

Having some level of formality in place has an influence on the effectiveness of process. The distinction illustrated in the table is between organizations which are described as having an arbitrary and unclear process of project initiation decision making, relative to those that have some degree of formality in the decision process. While the actual process, and its level of formality, may vary considerably, the presence of some level of formality was observed in all cases whose processes were identified as being “very effective” and many of those identified as being “somewhat effective.” Where there was an arbitrary or unclear decision making process, the process

effectiveness was identified as being “not effective” or “somewhat effective.” The implication is that where the decision making process is arbitrary or unclear, it detracts from overall process effectiveness.

Drivers of personal influence. Related to the idea of agency is how participants see themselves influencing the project initiation and decision making processes in their organizations. In this study, participants were asked to identify how they demonstrate their personal influence and establish credibility in supporting the project initiation process. The range of personal drivers by which people establish their influence is not only broad, but it has strong correlations to how they see themselves and the environment in which they operate. There also appears to be a degree to which personal influence has an impact on agency, and how agency is exercised.

The level of diversity in how people perceive themselves influencing the project initiation process is significant in the impact this self-perception has on how they describe the effectiveness of the process in their organization, and their relative satisfaction with the decision making environment. As has already been discussed, the decision making environment is strongly shaped by whether there is an explicit or implicit emphasis on decision making, and by the overall formality and the overall consistency of the rule environment. While there should be a correlation between the environment and those drivers of influence and credibility that the organization values, those drivers that participants highlight are often much more related to their own personal values than those of the organization.

The drivers that emerged from the interviews can be divided into two major categories: process drivers and political drivers. The process drivers focus on the credibility, knowledge and reputation of the individual. They highlight the degree to which participants emphasize “diligence,” “experience,” “process” and “reputation” as means of establishing their credibility in the project initiation process. Process drivers emphasize participants being willing to do the homework, demonstrating the background and having the experience and track record of delivery that show technical and subject knowledge. It is about

...demonstration of preparation and understanding of the material—and of your subject area... Being able to respond to questions and concerns of other

members of the panel, that you are responding to. Credibility in being able to address the issues. (4)

Another participant said, “I am able to establish credibility with them. I can make a technical decision—the one that needs to be made even when they don’t like it” (6). The emphasis on process drivers is largely rooted in competence, and the ability to project that competence to the rest of the organization.

What is significant in terms of the personal drivers of influence is that their impact largely appears to be determined by whether implicit or explicit rules are emphasized within the organization. Where participants highlight that the rule system emphasizes explicit rules, there appears to be greater impact when process-based drivers are leveraged. Where the organization has a rule system that emphasizes implicit rules, there appears to be a greater impact when political drivers are leveraged. When participants identify the drivers that they most emphasize, however, they seem to tend to emphasize those drivers that they personally value and perceive as establishing credibility, rather than those that have the greatest impact within their organization. The misalignment between environment and influence drivers also appears to determine the degree to which participants perceive that they have flexibility and opportunities for impact.

The following table illustrates the relationship between process drivers of influence and process effectiveness in those organizations that have an explicit emphasis in making project initiation decisions:

Table 20 - Process Drivers of Influence vs. Process Effectiveness (Explicit Emphasis)

Process Drivers of Influence	Process Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
# participants	2	5	4
Diligence	1	2	3
Experience	1		2
Process		1	

Process Drivers of Influence	Process Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Reputation		2	2

Where there is an emphasis on aspects of influence that reinforce process and experience dimensions, there appears to be a positive influence on process effectiveness. In those cases where process effectiveness was described as being “very effective,” more participants identified using drivers of “diligence,” “experience” and “reputation” as a means of reinforcing personal influence. Drivers of “diligence,” “process” and “experience” were also observed where process effectiveness was “somewhat effective.” Influence drivers were less likely to be observed where the process effectiveness was seen as “not effective.” This implies that the more effective the process in organizations with an explicit rule emphasis, the more participants are likely to reinforce this with emphasizing aspects of influence that are more process focussed.

Overall emphases on process effectiveness. As illustrated in the preceding discussion, several concepts ultimately have an influence on process effectiveness. Process formality and process consistency together have a significant influence, and the formality of the process of project initiation in particular is a determinant of overall process effectiveness. In addition, the degree to which the decision making process itself is not seen as arbitrary or unclear has an influence, and an arbitrary or unclear decision process in turn detracts from overall process effectiveness. In particularly effective process environments, participants are also more likely to emphasize individual influences that reinforce the process focus within the organization. In this study, the dimensions of process formality, process consistency, decision process formality and process drivers of influence were collectively observed to be determinants of process effectiveness.

Exploring the Influences on Rule Effectiveness

Rule effectiveness influences decision effectiveness in those organizations that have an implicit orientation. Although in these situations, the rules are more socialized or collectively understood than they are written down, they define the expectations and conventions of how project initiation is conducted within the organization. Some organizations with an implicit emphasis are seen as having rule systems that are “not effective,” while in others the rule system is seen as being “somewhat effective.” The influences on rule effectiveness are seen to be: the drivers of personal influence; decision politics; and the formality of the role of the project shaper, as illustrated in the following diagram:

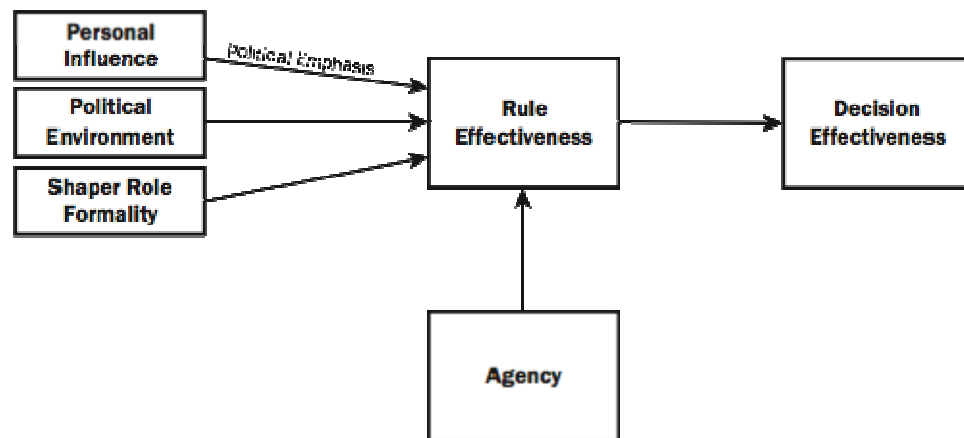


Figure 9. Influences on developing rule effectiveness.

Drivers of personal influence. The impact of drivers of personal influence has already been discussed in the context of process effectiveness. The second area of emphasis in terms of drivers of personal influence is their impact on rule effectiveness. Where there is a primary emphasis on rule effectiveness, the drivers that are seen to have influence are those that are more political in nature. These reinforce communication, relationships and political engagement within the organization. Their presence indicates the degree to which participants have identified influence to be a product of “political savvy,” “relationship” and “proactive communication.” Political influences can also be a product of formal power and influence within the organization, whether that power is a product of “position” or is “delegated.” Political drivers reinforce scenarios where relationships are leveraged; one participant said, for example,

I have a pretty broad network across the campus—able to leverage off those relationships, I am known—good or bad. May not know who to call, but you know someone who you can call. Can get someone to make introductions for you. (25)

These drivers reinforce the ability to guide and facilitate agreement, as illustrated by one participant who reflects on the need to

define where we need to go, [and] facilitate getting there in a way that is not about forcing the issue. Start by laying out overall objectives, and engage the team in a discussion about action items—what needs to be done to get there.

Empower them to go and do that. (13)

In terms of power and position, political drivers enable participants to engage in the power afforded by position and authority: “The people that tend to be selected are at the right level to do the job. You go in with implicit authority and power” (4). The political drivers are rooted in relationships and power, and the ability to exercise both informal and formal networks within the organization.

The following table illustrates the relationship between political drivers of influence and rule effectiveness in those organizations that have an explicit emphasis in making project initiation decisions:

Table 21 - Political Drivers of Influence vs. Rule Effectiveness (Implicit Emphasis)

Process Drivers of Influence	Rule Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
# participants	13	4	0
Delegated	3		
Position		1	
Political Savvy	1	4	
Proactive Communications	3	4	
Relationship	3	3	

Where there is an emphasis on drivers of influence that reinforce political dimensions, there appears to be a positive influence on rule effectiveness. Strategies of “political savvy,” “proactive communications” and “relationship” were employed by almost all participants where the rule environment was described as “somewhat effective.” Where the rule environment was indicated as being “not effective,” proactive communications and relationships were identified by comparatively much fewer participants; while the numbers selecting each driver appear similar, a much larger number of overall participants described the rule effectiveness of their organizations as “not effective,” but comparatively fewer participants adopted these strategies, where virtually all participants describing the rule effectiveness as “somewhat effective” employed these strategies. For those in an environment described as “not effective,” there was also more of an emphasis of relying on delegation—in other words, of leveraging the power and authority of others—rather than employing one’s own strategies. The implication is that the more effective the rule environment in organizations with an implicit emphasis, the more participants are likely to reinforce the rule environment with drivers of personal influence that emphasize political dimensions.

Decision politics

The politics underlying the project initiation process is a significant contributor to rule effectiveness. Participants have described different degrees of political influence on the decision making processes, from a highly interventionist environment to one where political influence is seemingly non-existent. The political environment has also been described as being very constructive and co-operative, while others are very hostile, obstructive and unproductive. Clearly, the political environment influences how individual decisions are made. There also appears to be evidence that political considerations influence the process environment within the organization, including the degree to which establishing a process emphasis is possible, and the resulting agency that participants perceive themselves as having in the project initiation process. These influences are explored in more detail below.

As with the other dimensions discussed thus far, a wide range of political practices have been described by participants within the study. While a number of participants reported that political activity had a strong influence, this was not uniformly

the case. In addition, there were two dominant narratives that framed the political behaviour within organizations: constructive and obstructive.

The presence of constructive political behaviours were for the most captured in participant descriptions that can be associated with such terms as “constructive” and “buy-in.” In these scenarios, participants indicated the presence of politics that supported and enhanced discussion and decision making within the project initiation process. Participants reflected on situations where disagreements and uncertainty were worked through in a productive fashion; one participant reported, for example,

Think there is an obligation to address ambiguity quickly—to pursue conversations and share information with the entire steering group. If there tends to be lack of clarity—then probably five other are people also uncertain. (5)

While there were political interactions, they were seen as being necessary in order to successfully define the project:

Politics at the level I mostly work on is in terms of the competing needs of various groups, and how well the project is going to meet those various needs. That’s intrinsic—that’s the problem. When I am doing a project I can do it to help this space, or that space. This becomes a critical conversation—too comprehensive, and the project becomes too big; too small, and it doesn’t get done. (6)

Constructive political behaviours were not seen as negative, but as the necessary vehicle by which questions are addressed and conflicting expectations are resolved.

The presence of obstructive political behaviours were primarily captured in participant descriptions that can be associated with such terms as “avoidance” and “disagreement.” They characterized scenarios where politics were seen as negative, and to undermine the process of decision making in the context of project initiation. Speaking of the ability to address conflict, one participant indicated,

[The organization] as a culture lets people act out in the room. Everyone lets uncomfortable situation happen, and will pull aside the person later. [The organization] is mostly a risk-averse culture—it doesn’t deal with outright confrontation. We will sheepishly address them. And they will do it again next time. (15)

Avoidance behaviour was characteristic of a number of participant descriptions:

Half of executives [are] very supportive of the project, and the others are questioning whether we are at the right level of investment. I don't think anyone is questioning whether it was the right investment, but we are now investing 50%-60% more than intended. There are a number of executives who are questioning behind closed doors whether that is an appropriate level of investment. They won't question it in an open forum, though. (1)

In part, the political difficulties are a product of the organizational environment, as described by one participant in an academic environment, who indicated,

The interesting thing around universities is that you have this concept of tenure. Faculty with tenure [have] little motivation to compromise—they are trained to critique, to debate, to defend their point of view. There is no incentive to move off a position. (22)

In the context of these organizations, politics are seen not as being constructive but as being a barrier; depending upon the perspective, it is a means of avoidance, of obstruction or of advancing personal interests at the expense of the larger interests of the organization.

What is particularly important regarding the influence of politics is how they affect the other aspects of the project initiation process, and particularly the degree to which participants perceive the process as being effective or not. In particular, where constructive political behaviours were described, there tended to be a great deal more perception of influence on the process, as indicated by the perceived flexibility or agency of the participant. Where obstructive politics predominated, this was seen as a constraint on the exercising of flexibility and agency. The consequence is that those that perceive themselves as having agency are more inclined to describe a positive political environment, while those perceiving little agency or flexibility are more likely to attribute it to the influence of negative political behaviours.

The following table illustrates the relationship between decision politics and rule effectiveness within those organizations with an implicit emphasis:

Table 22 - Decision Politics vs. Rule Effectiveness (Implicit Emphasis)

Decision Politics	Rule Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Negative	7	2	
Neutral	5	1	
Constructive	1	1	

Where there are negative decision politics within the organization, there is a tendency for the rule effectiveness within the organization to be less effective. The relationship between politics and rule effectiveness is not, for the most part, one with a positive influence. The presence of decision politics characterized as being “constructive” is both rare and undifferentiated in its influence on the effectiveness of the rule system. Where the rule effectiveness of the organization is identified as being “not effective,” however, there is a much greater likelihood of the political influence on decisions being described as “neutral” or particularly “negative.” The implication is that decision politics have an inverse influence on rule effectiveness; the more that the political influence on project initiation decision making is negative, the more likely the effectiveness of the rule system is seen to be ineffective.

Role of shapers

The role of project shaper, as explored in the previous section, also is broadly described by participants in the study. While all participants identified that the role of project shaper existed to some degree, for many the role was very informal and not consistent from project to project. Some identified a very formal role that they equated from the outset with the role of project sponsor. Arguably every participant involved in the study in some degree themselves manifested and embodied the project shaper role, and their responses indicated their own influence on how they shaped potential project opportunities. There also appears to be an influence between the perceived formality of

the project shaper role and the degree of agency to which participants perceive themselves as having.

While all participants identified that the role of “project shaper” exists to some degree in their organization, how the role is enacted varies. Some participants clearly identified this role as being that of the sponsor. For example one participant identified, “I don’t think it is a role, I think it is an expectation. We understand this is an important part of any organization – need someone in high enough position, to provide support of overall project” (5). Other participants identified the role as that of a subject matter expert, or a project manager.

Most often, and I am only going to deal with the large projects, they are assigned to it because they have a leadership role within the organization. They have some level of expertise within the area the project is dealing with. (3)

In all instances, there was someone that was identified as supporting the project through the initiation process, and relative acceptance of that role.

However, a number of participants identified that the project shaper role is at best informal within their organization. In these instance, there were a greater number of challenges observed in securing support and steering projects through the project initiation process. In some instances, the role of project shaper was one that was less supporting the business than it was the technology or PMO area within the organization. One individual, speaking about whether a project shaper existed, indicated, “No. Typically not. It is not there formally, but it might be informal. It is more looking at it on the technology side, less business analysis” (26). Another participant reinforced this idea by saying, “It is a typical role, but not an official one. Technically supposed to be executive champion or business sponsor” (6). Where someone is informally assuming the project shaper role, their appears to be lack of support and championing of the project in the organization. The project does not necessarily get the visibility, the support, the attention or the resources that it requires in order to be successful: “A lot of it depends upon the project. Depends on the individual—whether that person is respected in the organization. Very political organization. And it depends upon how it is going to impact their own organization” (7). Projects in organizations that have an informal shaper role appear to struggle more to get support for initiation than those with

a formal role. This again has an impact on the perceived flexibility and agency of the participant to work within and across the organization.

The following table illustrates the relationship between the formality of the project shaper role and rule effectiveness in those organizations with an implicit emphasis:

Table 23 - Project Shaper Formality vs. Rule Effectiveness (Implicit Emphasis)

Project Shaper Role	Rule Effectiveness		
	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Very Effective
Informal	6		
Formal	7	4	

Where there is an informal project shaper role, there is a tendency for the rule system to be less effective. In all of those organizations where the rule effectiveness was identified as being “somewhat effective,” the role of the project shaper was identified as being “formal.” All of those instances where the project shaper role was described as being “informal,” the rule effectiveness was identified as being “not effective.” While rule shaper formality does not necessarily ensure effectiveness of the rule system, lack of formality appears to have a negative influence. The implication would appear to be that where the project shaper role is informal, there is a greater likelihood that the rule system will be identified as being ineffective.

Overall emphasis on rule effectiveness. As illustrated in the preceding discussion, several concepts have an influence on rule effectiveness. While there were no organizations with a very effective rule system in this study, differences were observed between ineffective and somewhat effective rule systems. Drivers of personal influence that emphasized political characteristics were seen in circumstances where rule systems were seen as somewhat effective. Where there were ineffective rule systems, the decision politics were more likely to be perceived as negative. As has been shown in the review of agency, the presence of greater levels of agency was also perceived by participants as augmenting the effectiveness of the rule system. As well,

where the project shaper role was perceived as informal ,the rule system was more likely to be perceived as ineffective. Collectively, within this study the dimensions of political drivers of influence, decision politics, formality of the project shaper role and the presence of agency were observed to be determinants of rule effectiveness.

Overall influences on agency

The concepts that have been explored and expanded upon within this section collectively have a significant influence on how project initiation decisions are made, from the perspective of the participants in this study. They also described the broad influence on the project initiation process of the exercising of agency. Collectively, the concepts that have been discussed in this section are those that are deemed to be essential influences on how project initiation decisions are being managed within the various participant organizations.

As discussed in this section, decision effectiveness is predominantly influenced by the exercise of agency, which is augmented by the process effectiveness and rule effectiveness within an organization. Where there is a process emphasis within the organization, process effectiveness has an influence on overall decision effectiveness. Process effectiveness is itself influenced by process formality, process consistency, decision process formality and the exercising of process drivers of personal influence. Where there is an implicit emphasis within the organization, rule effectiveness has an influence on overall decision effectiveness. Rule effectiveness is itself influenced by the presence of political drivers of personal influence, and is negatively impacted by the presence of negative decision politics, and by the informality of the project shaper role. These relationships reflect the collective influences on how agency is exercised in project initiation decisions, and provides a basis for formulating a theory of how agency and rule emphasis influence project initiation decisions.

A Theory Of Project Initiation

The development of a theoretical framework that underscores the personal dynamics of project initiation decisions was grounded in a realization that many participants in this study, and likely many others, did not consider the rule environments and processes that existed in their organizations to be effective. The reasons for the lack of effectiveness were many, as were the perceived impacts or lack thereof: for

some, the consequences were that they felt that they did not understand why projects were initiated the way they were, and they also felt that they had no influence over the decision making process—either general influence, or influence in the context of an individual project. The consequence is that any resulting theory needs to explain not just what happens when the process is working, but also needs to articulate what is occurring when the process is not working, or is not working as effectively as might otherwise be desired or expected.

The theoretical framework that has been developed here represents substantive theory as defined in Corbin and Strauss (2008), not formal theory. It is constrained in two fundamental respects: it looks exclusively at the process of making project initiation decisions, and it specifically looks at the personal influences that impact an individual in supporting the project initiation decision process. There may be parallels to other decision making situations, and there may be insights that would be intriguing to explore at other levels of analysis, but within this study no exploration has been undertaken to provide any supportive foundations to those extrapolations.

This section introduces the theoretical framework that has emerged from this study. The theoretical framework is first introduced and explained. Implications for developing, employing and limiting agency in the context of the theoretical framework are also explored.

Theoretical Framework Overview

What has been developed in conducting this study is a theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on the process of making project initiation decisions. It builds upon the core concept of agency, and its influence in the face of explicit initiation processes and implicit rule systems, to explain how projects are initiated. The theory combines the relationships that have been discussed to date into a single holistic theoretical model, as illustrated in the following diagram:

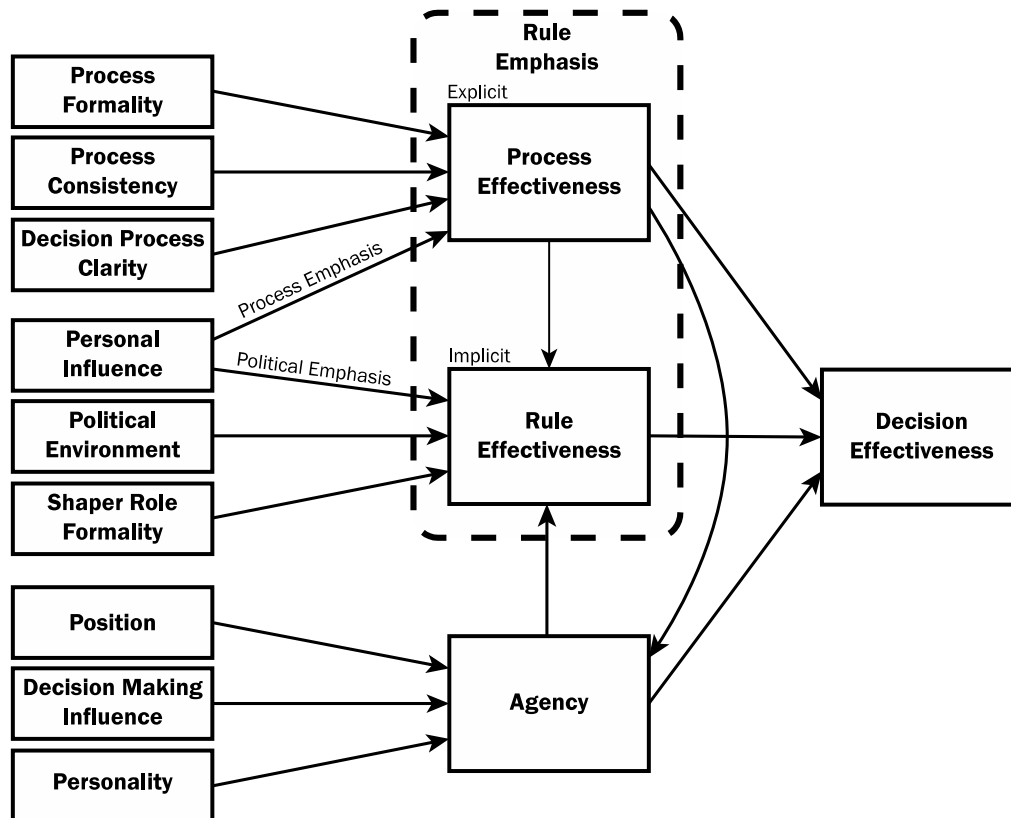


Figure 10. Theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on project initiation.

The theory developed within this study articulates the influence of agency and rule emphasis on decision effectiveness. While the individual relationships between concepts and the nature of their influence have been explored in detail in the previous sections within this chapter, they are now presented as an integrated, consolidated whole. The essential features of the theory are as follows:

- The effectiveness of the project initiation environment is determined by an understanding of decision effectiveness. This is an assessment of the degree to which project initiation decisions are appropriate and reasonable, and in particular the degree to which the environment (including the actions and influences of the participants within that environment) produce consistently effective decision results.
- The degree to which process effectiveness or rule effectiveness might influence decision effectiveness is a degree to which the approach to project initiation has

an explicit or implicit emphasis, as determined by the rule emphasis within the organization. Where there is an explicit emphasis, the project initiation is guided by an established process, while an implicit emphasis relies upon a rule system composed of collectively understood conventions and informal guidelines.

- Agency has a fundamental influence on the decision effectiveness in all contexts. Agency reflects the intention, ability and capacity to act—along with a corresponding level of awareness—on the part of individual actors within the rule environment, and reflects their willingness to work within, around or despite the dominant rule system. Agency can work to support the influences of process effectiveness or rule effectiveness, and agency can also override and compensate for organizational inadequacies. Agency can supplement rule effectiveness where required to support effective decisions in implicitly-focussed environments. While the exercise of agency does not change the process environment, and therefore does not have any direct influence on process effectiveness in explicitly-focussed environments, it can independently supplement the influences of less effective process environments.
- Where the process environment is particularly effective, the impact of agency can be constrained. The implication is that, because of the emphasis placed on a very formal and consistent process, in the face of a very effective process the action of agency is undesirable. The desire and intent is for project initiation to happen within the context of the process, and therefore in these instances the independent actions of actors exercising agency are in fact discouraged.
- Agency is influenced by a combination of structural and personal elements. Those actors that perceive themselves as having high levels of agency view their ability to be successful as being a product of their own individual capabilities, while those perceiving themselves as having little agency perceive this to be a product of external constraints. Factors that influence agency are those of position, decision making involvement within the organization, and the personality of the individual actor.
- Rule effectiveness is influenced primarily by the actions of individuals, where they engage in politically supportive and collaborative behaviours that work to

support the rule system in place, and where the detracting influences of negative decision politics and an informal shaper role are not present. While very effective rule systems have not been observed, moderately successful rule systems are able to be effectively augmented through the appropriate exercise of agency by actors. Negative rule systems are a product of inappropriate political behaviours, the presence of obstructive politics and an informal rather than formal project shaper role.

- Process effectiveness is influenced primarily by the formality and consistency of the project initiation process. Process effectiveness is also influenced by the presence of a clear project decision process and the utilization of process-based drivers of influence by actors within the process environment. Very effective process environments have a positive influence on effective decision making, and in these instances the presence of agency is less desirable and therefore constrained. Process environments that are less successful are able to be augmented and compensated for through actors engaging in the appropriate exercise of agency.

Insights Into Effective Project Initiation

The proposed theoretical framework provides some interesting insights into the various dimensions that are operative, and have an impact, in supporting effective project initiation decisions within organizations:

- Organizations described as having the greatest levels of effectiveness in supporting the initiation of projects within their organizations do so because of either a very formal, very consistent process environment, or the exercise of significant personal levels of agency.
- In organizations where the rule environments are described as “somewhat effective,” individuals performing the project shaper role compensate for this partly through the exercise of agency and predominantly through the exercise of reinforcing the orientation of the rule system with appropriate influencing behaviours, emphasizing either political or process drivers of influence.
- Where the rule systems of organizations are described as “not effective,” the presence of agency on the part of individuals playing the project shaper role, or

otherwise involved in supporting the decision making process, may make a difference in individual decision situations but does little to influence the initiation of projects on an on-going basis.

- Where the opportunity may exist for someone to exercise agency in the project shaper role, this can be overridden through unproductive political behaviours or where the project shaper role is not formally recognized.

The focus from the outset of this study has been on how personal influences support and shape the project initiation process. What the results of the study have demonstrated is the presence and impact of these influences, but also that the level of personal influence is dependent upon—and can be enhanced or undermined—by the organizational environment in which an individual finds themselves. It is helpful as a result to explore how influence can be reinforced, utilized and also constrained.

Developing Agency

The presence of agency has been identified in several instances as having a positive influence on the effectiveness of the rule environments within organizations. The presence of “strong agency” has been demonstrated to compensate for a range of political and process-related challenges. It has had a positive influence in organizations where the rule system has been described as “somewhat effective.” Its absence has in part contributed to the identification of rule systems as being “not effective.” Perhaps most importantly, it is one of the few genuinely personal influences on the initiation process within organizations.

As has been identified earlier in this study, the influences on agency that have emerged are predominantly three-fold:

- position within the organization
- influence on the decision
- personality of the project shaper

Of the characteristics that have been identified, two are predominantly a consequence of the organizational structure and power dynamics within the organization, and there is little personal room for movement. While a person can strive to elevate themselves within the organizational hierarchy, this is a long-term endeavour and subject to a number of personal and organizational considerations. Given the

association of decision influence and positional authority, enhancement of influence is equally tied to elevation in the organization. While promotion will have an influence over time, it is a long-term method of developing agency.

The other characteristic influencing agency, the personality of the project shaper, is interesting. The findings of this study identified a strong correlation between an agency of “considerable flexibility” and high scores in the personality dimension of “Insights red,” which is predominantly associated with extroverted-thinking. The characteristics of red behaviour—confidence, assertiveness, goal-orientation and outcome focus—are certainly characteristics that correlate with the concept of high levels of agency. It reflects a willingness and confidence on the part of an individual to step out and face challenges. Those with strong scores in “Insights red” are more likely to see success as a product of their individual contributions and efforts.

At the same time, there was also a reasonably strong correlation between an agency of “considerable flexibility” and low scores in the personality dimension of “Insights green,” which is predominantly associated with introverted-thinking. The characteristics of green behaviour—support for others, desire for harmony, caution, resistance to change—are also characteristics that are less likely to be associated with perceptions of high levels of agency. It reflects more of an emphasis of reliance on others and caution in the face of challenge. Those with high scores in “Insights green” would be more likely to be conscious of and constrained by perceived external barriers and limitations.

While changing personality in order to enhance agency may seem to be a strong prescription, awareness of these aspects of personality—and their influence on agency—is important. As was noted earlier, those with the strongest levels of agency viewed their success as a product of individual capabilities, latitude and influence, while those with the lowest levels of agency highlighted the influence of external forces as constraints. The implication of this insight is not that those with “Insights red” personality genuinely have more personal influence or those with “Insights green” personality have more external constraint; it is that each of these personalities perceives this reality. The orientation of “Insights red” is more inclined to place emphasis on their personal qualities and capabilities, while an orientation of “Insights green” is more inclined to

place emphasis on external barriers and roadblocks, or reliance on structural processes and structures.

Part of the challenge of developing agency, then, is a product of orientation. If we approach a problem focussed on limitations and barriers, those are what we are most likely to observe; if we approach a problem focussed on opportunities for success, those are what we are most likely to realize. While personality is perceived to be relatively fixed, at least in terms of core preferences, this study suggests that individuals who are able to enhance confidence, self-reliance and a belief in the existence and effectiveness of their capabilities are more likely to perceive themselves as having greater agency than those who do not or can not.

Employing Agency

While the development or enhancement of agency is one challenge facing individuals who find themselves in the role of project shaper, the effective employment of agency also requires focus and consideration. While agency represents the degree of personal flexibility a person has to work within and around the rule system in his or her organization, how agency is employed has been demonstrated to influence whether the resulting process or rule system is perceived as being effective or not. The responsible exercise of agency would also therefore seem to be an important consideration for individuals in the project shaper role.

An important first part of exercising agency is to understand the rule system that exists within the organization. Understanding the rule system requires being aware of both the political and the process dimensions of the project initiation process, and the degree to which each is adhered to within the organization. As has been observed in the various participant descriptions within this study, there are varying degrees of adherence to the process of project initiation. The type of project, its urgency, the status and relative power of the sponsor, the effectiveness of politics within the executive team and the wielding of executive fiat all have been demonstrated to influence how projects are initiated and the degree to which they conform to the stated process within the organization. Recognizing the formality, consistency and actual application of the rule system associated with project management is therefore an important first step.

Equally important is understanding the emphasis of the rule system within the organization. This means understanding whether there is more of an orientation towards explicit process, implicit understanding or a combination of the two. Just the presence of process is not necessarily an indication in this regard; what must be determined is the degree to which the process is actually utilized, with what level of formality and rigour, and by whom. As noted earlier, some participants described the emphasis in their organization as being “explicit” because that was how they personally desired the rule system to operate, when the actual operation of the rule system was far more implicit, being driven largely by political influence. Recognition of whether the rule system is genuinely explicit, implicit or a variation is also necessary in understanding how to exercise agency.

Exercising agency in a manner that is appropriate would then appear to be a product of emphasizing the aspects of agency that have the greatest influence depending upon the context of the rule system and its emphasis. Where there is an implicit focus, exercising agency and particularly reinforcing collaborative and political aspects of behaviour would appear to be appropriate; this would include leveraging relationships, proactively communicating and being sensitive to the political dynamics and influences at work within the project initiation decision. Where there is an explicit focus, emphasizing the process of influence appears to be more effective: exercising diligence, demonstrating expertise, reinforcing process and underlining the track record of the project shaper in similar previous efforts. Where there are characteristics associated with rule systems that have been seen as “not effective,” it would also appear to be important to recognize that the only compensating influence may be the agency—and its relative strength—of the individual in the project shaper role. Depending upon the degree of politics, and the extent to which they are negative and hostile or the role of project shaper is not formally recognized, an individual may still be unsuccessful.

A final consideration in discussing the responsible exercising of agency would be where there is in place a very formal, very consistent process. In these situations, the process is the basis of the rule system, and there is clearly a strong level of investment in establishing and sustaining that rule system. In such a context, exercising agency

may not only be inappropriate, but could also be counterproductive. It is a telling observation that none of the participants who described such an environment described utilizing a considerable level of agency, and those who exercised any agency were very clear about the contexts and situations in which it was appropriate. Strong agency and strong process capabilities are therefore potentially not compatible.

Limiting Agency

While strategies for effectively and responsibly employing agency is a significant part of the theoretical framework resulting from this study, there is also a reality that agency has been limited or constrained in several scenarios as well. There are both organizational and individual considerations for where this has occurred. In having a full appreciation of the role of agency in project initiation decisions, it is important to understand both.

From an organizational perspective, agency was described as being constrained or limited in two specific instances: those organizations described as having the most formal processes, and those that had the least. In organizations where the process was very formal and very consistent, agency was described as being less necessary, and could be argued to be counter to the intended objectives of having in place a well defined process to which the organization consistently adhered. When the rules are formally defined and intended to be consistently adhered to, willingness to operate around or outside of the rules could be considered counterproductive behaviour.

The other instance of agency being constrained by organizational factors emerged predominantly within implicit rule systems with a negative political environment, and where the project shaper role was seen as informal. Even in instances where the actor described a level of agency characterized as “some flexibility,” the presence of an avoidance political culture and insufficient recognition of the shaper role was enough to negate the impacts of agency that otherwise should have been possible. The implication of this is that there are some organizational environments that are sufficiently caustic and obstructive in terms of politics that only those with only “some” levels of agency are insufficient to make a difference. While strong levels of agency may be sufficient to overcome organizational inertia, as evidenced in other participant descriptions, there is a delicate balance between the

forces of agency and avoidance. While someone with sufficient agency may be successful in supporting initiation of a project, there is also the risk that an organizational environment could have sufficiently negative and obstructive politics that efforts to exercise agency may be actively suppressed.

The final consideration around limitations of agency are personal in nature. Just as there was a positive correlation of agency and personality, there is also a negative one, and it had the greatest level of statistical significance in the study findings. Those with the lowest scores of “Insights green” are most likely to be characterized as having agency described as “strong flexibility”; those with high scores of “Insights green” are most likely to be characterized as having agency described as “some flexibility” or “no flexibility.” As well, the study findings demonstrated that those with the lowest levels of agency attributed this to external constraints, while those with the highest levels of agency attributed this to personal capabilities. It is arguable, based upon these findings, that these perceptions are simply perceptions. The level of agency, the capacity to be flexible and to flexibly and creatively respond to situations, may be largely a product of how much an actor feels that he or she is able to do so.

Influences On Project Initiation

In this chapter, I have sought to move beyond phenomenological description to the formation of theory. I have endeavoured to develop a theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on the process of making project initiation decisions within organizations. In developing this theory, I have introduced and extensively explored the core category of agency. I have also identified the concepts that interact with agency in order to give the proposed theory its conceptual richness. This has involved elaborating on how process effectiveness and rule effectiveness combine in different orientations to augment and constrain agency. The concepts of process and rule effectiveness have been further expanded upon through defining the influence that process formality, process consistency, decision process clarity, personal drivers of influence, decision politics and the formality of the project shaper role combine to support their development. The resulting theory provides a framework for individual actors to assess strategies for developing agency and influencing process and rule effectiveness within the context of their organizations in order to improve decision effectiveness.

The result of this chapter is the development of a substantive theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on decision effectiveness. Through exploring the process of selective coding, the chapter has addressed and answered the third research question of this study: “What are the perceived influences on decision making process effectiveness?” The development and presentation of the theoretical framework has also enabled me to answer the fourth and final research question that emerged as a result of conducting this study: “How do personal and structural influences shape the making of effective project initiation decisions?” The theory offers a more nuanced understanding of the influences on the project initiation process, and provides practical guidance to improving personal influence and organizational decision making effectiveness. Finally, while the theory proposed remains unproven, support for the theory is grounded in the data that was collected in this study. The next chapter revisits the data in order to demonstrate the applicability of the theory in a variety of scenarios.

Chapter 7 - Theory Testing

Introduction

Within this study, I have thus far explored what the data offers in terms of insight and explanation regarding project initiation decisions and the influences that individuals have on them. In conducting the analysis, I have highlighted the dynamics of agency, personality and politics as they manifest themselves in a variety of different organizations. I have explored how the emphasis of the rule system (whether implicit or explicit), the formality and consistency of initiation processes, the manifestation of politics, the clarity of the decision process and in particular the agency of individuals all combine to influence decision making. The result has been the development of a theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on project initiation decision effectiveness.

This theory hopefully provides a compelling explanation for how structural and personal influences combine to influence the development of effective initiation decisions. The theory that has been proposed was developed through a detailed exploration of the essential concepts identified through the findings and analysis. It is a theory that is built from the data that was collected. In this chapter, we return to the data to explore the validity of the theory.

This chapter presents a number of scenarios that have been drawn from the collected data. These scenarios help to illustrate how different levels of process effectiveness and individual influence result in different decision making environments. Each scenario produces a very different result in terms of the clarity, the effectiveness and the overall satisfaction of participants with the decision making environment. These perspectives are intended to provide insightful and resonant descriptions of the various environments in which participants found themselves as they endeavoured to support the initiation of projects within their organizations. Most importantly, the scenarios are intended to illustrate the relevance and applicability of the proposed theory. After each scenario, a brief discussion of the implications of the theory in explaining that scenario is provided. A negative case is also provided, illustrating some of the limitations that still may be present in the theoretical framework as offered. This chapter concludes with a discussion on the current empirical literature regarding agency and organizational rules

and routines, and discusses the contributions of the study to furthering understanding of these areas.

Theoretical Exploration of the Influences on Project Initiation

Conducting this study led to the development of a theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on project decision making effectiveness. To illustrate the application of this theory in the context of the data collected, this section provides a number of specific scenarios, drawn from individual participant descriptions. Six scenarios are presented, each of which has differing individual and structural influences, and results in different levels of process and rule effectiveness. In presenting the scenario, a detailed description of the organization is provided. The scenario uses the core concepts presented within the theoretical framework to explore the decision making environment and its influence on process and rule effectiveness. A discussion of overall effectiveness of the environment is presented. Finally, each scenario is concluded with a discussion of how the theory explains the dynamics within the representative organization.

Each scenario in this section is drawn from one specific participant, and illustrates the major influences described by the participant within that organization. In doing so, each scenario describes a different dimension of how the identified concepts intersect. The following diagram provides an overview of each of the scenarios and the essential attributes that are operating within each one:

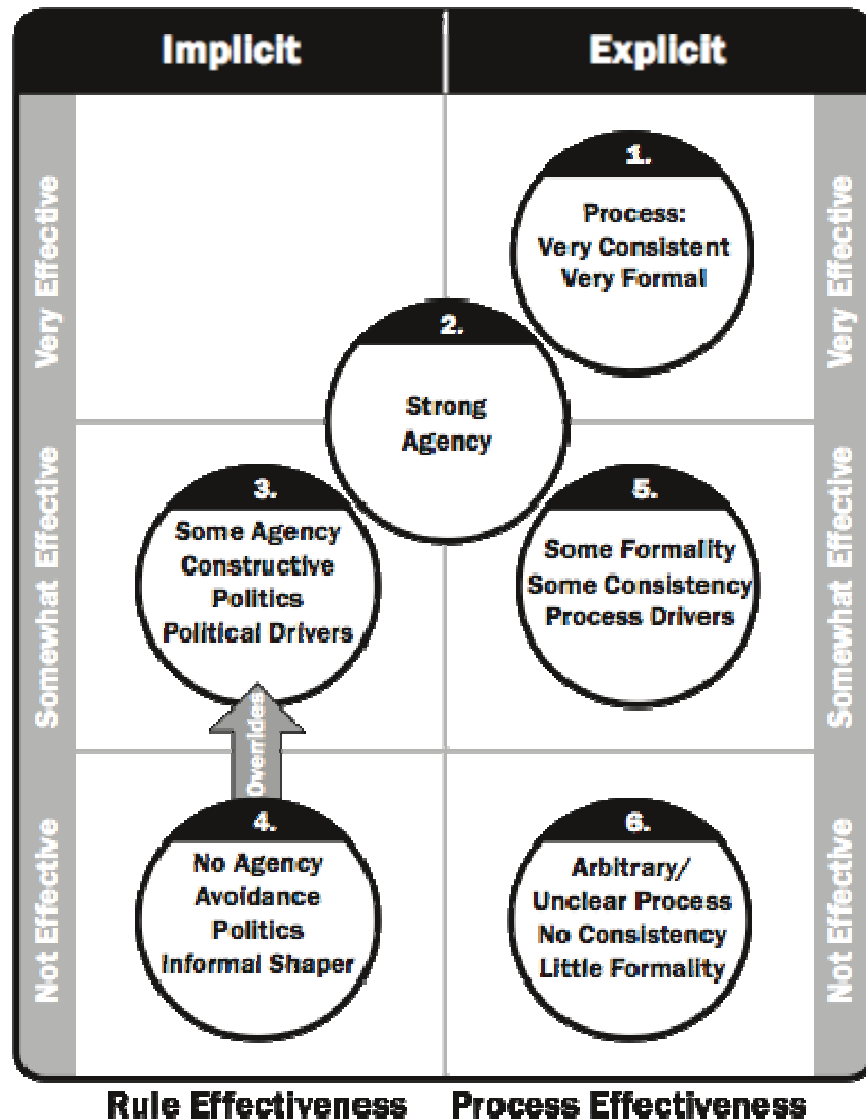


Figure 11. Scenarios explored in reviewing the proposed theory.

The diagram draws on the dimensions and attributes that are described in the theoretical framework. First, the diagram is delineated based upon the rule emphasis associated with a particular scenario; whether there is an implicit emphasis and a corresponding focus on the implicit rule system of the organization, or whether there is an explicit emphasis and a corresponding focus on explicit process within the organization. Each scenario has been selected to illustrate degrees of effectiveness within these orientations, and to illustrate the traits that contribute or detract from process and rule effectiveness. The essential attributes from the theoretical framework, and the specific traits exhibited within those attributes, are highlighted within the circle.

The scenarios are presented in the sequence indicated by the numbers at the top of each circle. In each scenario, the pronoun describing the gender of the participant has been assigned at random.

The scenarios characteristics and representative quotations from the scenario case studies are summarized in the following table:

Table 24 - Summary of Explored Scenarios

#	Scenario Title	Characteristics	Example Quotes
1.	Formal, consistent process	High process consistency High process formality Minimal level of agency	"There is an expectation that they will follow a standard process. Checklists and forms are employed. We make sure that they are following a specific process." "With the standards and peer review that we are subject to it is very important that we adhere to and follow this process." "The decision is always the [head of the organization]. We make recommendations that we think it is a good fit, but ultimately it is the [head of the organization's] decision to proceed or not."
2.	Strong agency	Strong level of agency	"Moving forward by the nature of the environment, neither the implicit social rules or the explicit required rules are sufficient to get projects approved. You need to go out of band for all of these." "The executive wants and is comfortable with a statement that is provided with "moral confidence," that has clear expertise." "My projects seldom fail. Can usually take the approach that I believe needs to occur to get traction."
3.	Agency and constructive politics	Moderate level of agency Constructive politics employed Political drivers of influence	"It hasn't been as formally defined as it is going to be.... The rigour around that is going to improve." "If there is an initiative that has organizational support, then you would see a lot of people coming behind that." "...I make sure that I take the

			<p>opportunity to engage in the other directors in social opportunities—develop personal relationships. Get the ability to pick up the phone and get support and assistance"</p>
4.	Avoidance politics and informal shaper	<p>Minimal level of agency Avoidance politics employed Shaper role seen as informal</p>	<p>"Politics has a much higher ranking in terms of the decision." "...instead of looking at the merits of the project my supervisor will look at the political power of the people requesting..." "[The project shaper role] is not there formally, but it might be informal.</p>
5.	Formality and process drivers	<p>Moderate process consistency Moderate process formality Process drivers of influence</p>	<p>"I think it is pretty formal in terms of governance panels. Initiation is not that formal, but we do have a governance committee, and a business case." "There have [still] been occasions where the vendor has come up with a wonderful solution, and then you go looking for a problem that it will solve." "... you need the formal admin support (a funded business case and current status in green) as well as peer and/or senior management support, for example due to strategic value."</p>
6.	No formality and unclear process	<p>Arbitrary and unclear process No process consistency Little process formality</p>	<p>"Not formal at all... A lot of times, the initiation decision has been made prior to doing the project charter. Sometimes the charter is used as the idea document, but a lot of times, "here's an idea and run with it." "Probably all over the map. A lot of times we will get told to do something because the premier/deputy/executive said so, and therefore we have to do it." "Not great decision tracking; or even writing decisions down." "A lot of people are heads down. Not that there is an ill will, but people don't necessarily spend a lot of time thinking about what other people need."</p>

1. Formal, consistent process

The first scenario, “formal, consistent process,” is drawn from the public sector. The participant is an executive within a provincial agency responsible for auditing of government performance and accountability. The projects that the organization undertakes are typically audit engagements within various government departments, as well as internal corporate projects that are designed to support on-going productivity improvement and the enhancement of the organization’s services.

Within the organization, the “rule emphasis” is identified by the participant as being “mostly implicit,” even though there are significant process constraints in place on the identification and initiation of projects. In reviewing the description in more detail, it became clear that there is actually a strong explicit focus within the organization, which is why this scenario is included here. Observes the participant,

Sometimes, [I] think it is more important to understand the implicit rules. How does this fit within where the executive is thinking in their strategic planning in the next few years—might not be built into any of the explicit rules. Understanding where the boss wants to go. If you understand that, it helps to understand which projects are likely to go ahead. (8)

In other words, the flexibility is not in the process that is adhered to in this instance, but the projects that are being proposed and how to shape and position those projects to best meet the needs and direction of the organization.

The process within the organization was very clearly described as “very formal” and “very consistent.” There was a well defined process governing the initiation of projects within this organization, and it was described as being rigorously adhered to, particularly for audit projects:

Within an audit project, there is so much formality. There needs to be a topic identification, it goes to the operations committee, and we need to determine that it is within the purview of the office. It then goes through planning process to define how will we do it, do we have good criteria, can we do the work? The audit planning memorandum is approved by the challenge committee. We also need to demonstrate that it fits within the mandate of the office. (8)

Speaking of the consistency of their process, the participant said, “On the audit side, we manage very consistently. Given the standards and peer review that we are subject to, it is very important that we adhere to and follow this process” (8). While corporate projects are not subject to the same degree of formality and consistency, there is also an effort to introduce more formality to how these projects are initiated.

In establishing personal credibility, the participant identified a combination of process and political drivers. The primary emphasis was on “diligence” and “experience.” The participant commented,

Part of it is what I brought with me when I came here from [previous employer]—years of experience in doing similar work. [. . .] The other part is doing the research to understand what the issues are. It is about spending some time talking to some of the key people, those that could potentially be roadblocks, and understanding and making sure that I’ve dealt with those concerns. (8)

While the goal is one of addressing roadblocks, part of the approach recognizes the need to engage in proactive communications with other individuals within the organization to secure support or eliminate opposition.

The political aspect of project initiation in this scenario appears to be almost entirely constructive. While the participant is employed within a public sector agency, and the work that the agency does can have public visibility and speak to the politics of the day, he reported very little in the way of internal politics. Commenting on the politics surrounding a project being considered, the participant said,

It has the buy in that it is something that is appropriate for our office to do. Most of the stuff that I have brought forward, I have not had a problem with any of the executive. The stuff we want to do is seen as having a positive impact on the work that they are doing. (8)

While there may be debate, it is characterized as being constructive in nature: “Mostly, people are pretty good about being vocal about supporting or not supporting a project” (8). Overall, politics has little overt influence on the project initiation process.

The decision process itself is quite straightforward, and responds to the hierarchical environment that exists within the organization. While the participant is a member of the executive team of the organization, and has a role in recommending

projects for initiation, the decision making process is very clear: “The decision is always the [head of the organization]. We make recommendations that we think it is a good fit, but ultimately it is the [head of the organization’s] decision to proceed or not” (8). The fact that the direction is ultimately determined by the organization’s head is not seen as an issue or a problem; it is stated as a simple fact of how decisions are actually made.

The role of project shaper is one that definitely exists within this organization, particularly for the audit projects that the organization conducts. The project shaper’s role is to champion the project from the outset, and to provide support throughout the initiation process. In discussing whether the project shaper role exists, the participant response was,

Oh absolutely. On the audit side, they are called engagement leaders. They are expected to be championing the project, to sell it to the challenge committee. On corporate projects, generally there is also someone put on as project champion in order to discuss it at executive committee. (8)

While the participant is an executive within the organization, and the overall process and rule environment within the organization is seen as one that is quite effective, the perceived agency or flexibility was identified as “no flexibility.” Because of the formality of the process, the scrutiny to which potential projects are subjected, and the fact that the ultimate decision as to whether a project will proceed is made by the organizational head, the scope and latitude of the participant is quite constrained. He can recommend projects, but those projects will be constrained by the direction of the strategy and organization. The individual is involved in defining projects, but an extensive and active committee structure has primary responsibility for the actual definition, assessment and formulation of how a project will proceed forward. What latitude that does exist relies upon learning how the organization works and operating within those expectations.

Overall, the scenario described is a very effective project initiation environment, but it is one that is driven by the formality and consistency of its process. The rules are perceived as being very effective and the process is seen as being very effective. There is clarity in terms of how project initiation decisions are made, and also of the processes and influences that govern those decisions. The environment is perceived as very

collaborative and professional, and the politics as constructive and supportive. However, this is an environment where process and organizational formality dominate, and individual agency is constrained. Instead of personal influence or agency in engaging with the project initiation process, there is an expectation of adherence.

Theoretical implications of formal, consistent process. Where there is both an explicit process environment and a very effective process in place, participants predominantly characterized the process as “very consistent” and “very formal.” While this level of formality and consistency is by no means common, it does occur in a small number of organizations. Four participants in this study described an organizational environment that was characterized as being extremely consistent and extremely formal in their project initiation process. Two of these were consulting companies that had very rigorous processes for initiating client engagements, and two were public sector organizations; the first had established the process environment in response to a very divisive political environment that had previously been in place, while the second was a public agency responsible for the auditing of government performance and accountability, and had a highly rigorous process of preparing for audit engagements.

In all of the organizations that were characterized by explicit and very effective processes, there was a corresponding constraint on perceived agency by participants. Because of the rigour and formality of process, there is by the nature of the environment less room to manoeuvre around the rules within the organization. The value of rigorous consistency is also a constraint on freedom and flexibility. Thus while all of the participants in this group were comparatively senior within their organizations, they did not perceive a significant level of flexibility or agency. This was not a criticism, per se; there was in all instances respect and appreciation for why the formality was in place, but its consequence was a comparative constraint on freedom and latitude of behaviours.

2. Strong agency

The second scenario, “strong agency,” provides a marked counterpoint to the first one. The participant in this instance is a mid-management-level project consultant within a large, private sector firm in the pharmaceutical sector. The participant is employed within the information services division of the organization, and the types of

projects that are reflected within this scenario are large-scale systems development and integration efforts. The participant's self-declared role is, "Structuring projects so that they are technically feasible, tracking them to ensure that they remain there, and getting involved when projects run into trouble in order to get them back on track" (6).

In describing whether the organization focussed on explicit or implicit rules, the participant's response was a clear rejection of both:

My answer to that is "neither." Moving forward by the nature of the environment, neither the implicit social rules or the explicit required rules are sufficient to get projects approved. You need to go out of band for all of these. (6)

In other words, getting projects initiated requires an established willingness to go outside of the rules.

Despite the professed requirement to work "outside of the system" to get projects initiated, there is a defined and relatively formal process in place governing the process of project initiation. The process is described as having "some formality" and being "mostly consistent," but at the same time is characterized by the participant as being "not effective." In discussing the process, the participant indicated,

Technically, you will always do the formal exercise. All of the documents will be produced, but the quality of the content of those documents is never really discussed in detail. Side discussions become dominant terms of whether the project gets approved, and after that they check for a positive NPV [net present value]. (6)

The perception of the process is that it is a vehicle that presumes moving to execution without any real consideration; it is a means of justifying on-paper justification of decisions that have already been made.

In performing the role of project shaper, the participant perceived a number of drivers as influencing their ability to be effective, including credibility and expertise. The initial basis of credibility was perceived as being a product of "experience" and "reputation":

The executive wants and is comfortable with a statement that is provided with "moral confidence," that has clear expertise. That is not just whim. The ability of

the person to be able to understand the details, where if they press, they will get a solid answer back. It helps if that person has a track record. (6)

In defining and initiating projects, however, the participant primarily emphasizes a process of “proactive communications,” where she actively engages with stakeholders who have an influence on or are impacted by the project. In describing the successful approach, the participant said,

I reach out to the organization that is concerned and involve them in the discussion and the decision making. I clearly listen to concerns. That is not the same as accepting demands, but it is involving them deeply enough in what is going on that they can realize themselves what the trade-offs are. (6)

While credibility and expertise are seen as being important with the executives, the participant credits a process of open communication as an honest broker and facilitator for success.

Politics are characterized as having “strong influence” within the organization. Decisions are made at the senior executive committee, with strong input from Finance. The decision is, “...derived in principle based upon business analysis. No one will really know what the costs are, and no one really knows what the returns are. The process is flawed, but it is what all companies use” (6). At the same time, there is a very clear realization that politics are the means by which the participant exercises influence in supporting the project initiation process:

Politics at the level I mostly work on is in terms of the competing needs of various groups, and how well the project is going to meet those various needs. That’s intrinsic—that’s the problem. When I am doing a project I can do it to help this space, or that space. This becomes a critical conversation—too comprehensive, and the project becomes too big; too small, and it doesn’t get done. (6)

While the decision politics are seen as being arbitrary, the process of politics itself is the means by which the participant identifies themselves as being successful, and the essence of how they solve the problem associated with any one project.

The participant described the decision process within the organization as having “insufficient process” and being “arbitrary.” In describing how the initiation decision itself is made, she says,

Slide discussions become dominant in terms of whether the project gets approved, and then they check for a positive NPV. There is this informal process, because the document package as a whole doesn't provide understanding. (6) The participant's criticism of this process is that there is little understanding of what is actually being done within a project, and what will be produced as a result.

The role of the project shaper is seen as "informal," and as traditionally played out it is not necessarily effective. In discussing the shaper role, the participant said, "It is a typical role, but not an official one. Technically supposed to be executive champion or business sponsor" (6). When addressed informally, however, a subject matter expert can have much more influence on the process: "In practice, [a] member of the core team will come in who really understands the project—and if you can get that, it will succeed" (6). The shaper role is still important, but what is critical is having someone who actually understands the project, and can advocate for what is required.

In terms of agency, this participant views themselves as having "considerable flexibility," and also considerable success.

My projects seldom fail. Can usually take the approach that I believe needs to occur to get traction. It often takes a long time to get the initial traction. But I understand how to work with the culture of most of the sites—by nature that is where I started. (6)

An essential key to exercising agency is seen as understanding not what the rules are, but the underlying principles and limits that led the rules to being established in the first place:

Going back thirty years now, a key is to understand what the rules are. Not what the full processes are, but the various limits. Why the limits are there. What the expectation of those is. A lot of small projects are much easier to succeed at than one large project. Structuring of your projects, consistent with the governance rules of your company —don't cheat here (don't make five \$9,999 projects if limit is \$10,000). Understand the rules and work within them. (6)

While the participant describes her approach as working within the rules, it became clear from many examples that appeared in her contribution to the study that she often worked around them without violating the core principles the rules are based upon, and

respecting and adhering to the cultural principles and values that exist within the organization.

As in the previous scenario, in scenario 2 there is a process governing project initiation in place, and it is adhered to with relative consistency. Unlike the previous scenario, however, this process is not seen as one that provides a great deal of value, supports comprehension of individual projects or leads to an effective decision making process. What compensates for this is the agency of the individual participant. She sees herself as having a great deal of latitude, flexibility and autonomy, and in part views the value of her role as being that of an “iconoclast” with a reputation for actually getting things done. Despite ineffective politics, ineffective process and arbitrary decision making, strong agency in this case provides a means of navigating the project initiation process in such a way that projects can best be positioned for success.

Theoretical implications of strong agency. This category of rule system does not occur at the intersection of rule emphasis and effectiveness, but in fact transcends several of them. Within the study, several participants indicated the presence of “considerable flexibility,” and with that flexibility a strong level of agency. Five participants in all indicated strong levels of agency. While the underlying process effectiveness and rule effectiveness of the environments described by these participants were either “somewhat effective” or “not effective,” these participants collectively described circumstances where the exercising of their personal level of agency was able to compensate for deficiencies within their organizations. The implication is that the presence of strong agency is sufficient to compensate for ineffective rule systems and process capabilities within the project initiation process.

The implications of the role of agency are significant. The construct of agency is one that is perceived within individuals; it is not a measure of broad flexibility within the organization itself. Individuals with strong agency have taken it upon themselves to circumvent, stretch, reinterpret or ignore various rules and processes in their organizations in order to support the projects they are working to initiate. Depending upon the organization, these actions have been consciously sought, condoned or actively or passively ignored. While it is possible for agency to compensate for

ineffective process or inappropriate rules, this is a product of the behaviours of individuals rather than organizations.

As has also been observed, where there are strong processes—defined as those that are very formal and very consistent—strong levels of agency do not appear to be required. Executives who in other contexts might have strong personal influence and autonomy indicate a suborning of this individual flexibility in favour of the organizational processes. Within these organizations, it is questionable what influence strong agency, of the nature that has been described here, would actually have. It is arguable that, particularly where the process continues to be seen as being effective, strong agency would be discouraged and suppressed as counter to the interests of the organization. Efforts to circumvent the rules would likely be constrained rather than condoned.

3. Agency and constructive politics

The third scenario focusses on “agency and constructive politics.” Like the previous scenario, agency is an operative dimension here, but perhaps not to the same degree as in scenario 2. The organization in question is a department within a large North American municipality. The participant is a director with the organization, responsible for the construction of large-scale transportation infrastructure projects.

The rule emphasis within the organization is identified as “implicit.” In discussing which types of rules it was more important to focus on, the participant responded, “Understand the implied ones—explicit ones you can read, the others you have to get off the wind. They are more difficult. The more challenging things to tackle” (9). The implication is that while explicit rules can and do exist, they are much more straightforward and easily engaged with than implicit rules; the latter are more ethereal, but also much more critical to understand and engage with.

The process in place within this organization has “some formality.” Historically, the formal process has had little emphasis within the organization. There is currently an initiative underway, that is being led from the top of the organization, to change this. Discussing the current process environment, the participant offered, “It hasn’t been as formally defined as it is going to be.... The rigour around that is going to improve. There will be much more expectation regarding some of those first steps: initiation, rationale, support for benefits” (9). In terms of consistency, the process is seen as “very

inconsistent”: “Right now very inconsistent. Part of the rationale for improving” (9). The consequence of both the relative informality and the high level of inconsistency is that the project initiation process is currently viewed as being fairly ineffective.

In working to support the initiation process, the participant reinforces both process and political dimensions of influence. A baseline of credibility is presumed to be needed by the participant. In discussing what shapes personal influence, the participant said, “I think partly by performance. If we can show that we do things well, then we can start talking about the things that we do well. The underpinning thing. You build credibility by doing things well” (9). While credibility is a necessary underpinning, however, the primary emphasis discussed by the participant was more politically motivated, stating that there was a need to focus on “relationship,” “proactive communication” and “political savvy.” The participant highlighted the success of “...those that have been able to understand the political winds...” (9), as well as the importance of building effective relationships: “Another thing is I make sure that I take the opportunity to engage in the other directors in social opportunities—develop personal relationships. Get the ability to pick up the phone and get support and assistance” (9). The implication is that, while credibility is a presumed base, there is a strong need to establish and maintain effective political networks, and to constructively engage other members of the organization in supporting the project initiation process effectively .

Politics in this organization has a “strong influence.” This is perhaps not entirely surprising, given that it is a municipality in the public sector, and therefore politics are an inevitable part of the environment. The political environment, however, strongly emphasizes the need to engage in consultation and to “seek buy-in” for the decision. In discussing political influence, the participant indicated, “Try and see what kind of general support, or general opposition, there would be. If we are going into business units and getting support, then OK. If we are getting negative reaction, then we would change our approach” (9). Ensuring political support is critical: “No point in going if you don’t think you can garner big-p and little-p political support” (9). A significant part of the project initiation process therefore emphasizes consultation and securing buy-in from critical stakeholders, and shaping what will be proposed based upon what those stakeholders are prepared to support.

The decision making process in the organization involves a recommendation by the senior administrative team within the organization, and an actual approval by Council. Officially, administration is responsible for focussing on the technical aspects of the project while the focus of Council is on the political considerations, "...in practice, there are a lot of political considerations in our projects" (9). Even for large projects, the focus in the decision making forum is very high level:

Would do probably a presentation on some of the major thoughts, direction, ideas. No more than five slides. A five-to-seven minute presentation and let them ask questions. Outline and get their agreement on the approach that they would support.... But that would be about all the time you are going to get. Need to be very succinct. (9)

Once a project is presented for consideration, there is a presumption that consultation and technical assessment has occurred. What is actually debated in making the decision, however, is comparatively brief and high level.

In this organization, the participant says, the role of project shaper exists, and would typically be performed by a subject-matter expert. In discussing the shaper role, the participant said,

What happens in something like this is that the general manager would appoint someone within their group to do that. Had some things in [one business area]—an individual was appointed at a mid-management level to carry that forward. (9)

Much of the credibility for the project shaper role is highly dependent upon support within the organization:

If there is an initiative that has organizational support, then you would see a lot of people coming behind that. If it is being imposed, then they might be quite isolated. A lot of it has to do with support, and the project itself. And the support for the project. (9)

While the shaper role exists, it is one that is critically dependent upon political support for the project, and the degree to which the project itself is seen as being valued.

The participant observes that he has "some flexibility" in terms of perceived agency within the organization. The organization is highly political in its internal operations, and requires support and buy-in from those who are impacted by a project

in order for it proceed. In discussing the ability to exercise influence, the participant offered,

Probably more than half of the challenge is the need to know the rules—where to step and where not to step. Where you can count on performance and not performance. If those guys never fulfill, then the initiative will drop with no backup. You need an understanding of where there is support, and where that will actually result in performance. (9)

While there is some flexibility by the participant to influence the process, much more is influenced by others. Playing within the rules that are socially sanctioned by the organization is critical to overall success.

In this scenario, there are deficiencies in the project initiation process and challenges in how decisions are made about project opportunities. While there is an initiative underway to improve the formality and consistency of the process, it is an open question whether or not that will have traction given the amount of political influence that drives how the project initiation process actually operates. In this instance, influence in project initiation is a combination of having some agency, along with a recognition of the need to work within the rules. That requires understanding of the rule environment, which is driven by politics, relationships and influence.

Theoretical implications of agency and constructive politics. Where the organization is characterized as having an implicit rule system that is seen as being somewhat effective, there is again an interesting intersection of organizational and individual characteristics. Four organizations were characterized as having an “implicit” emphasis, with the corresponding rule environment described as “somewhat effective.” Two of these organizations were in the education sector, one is a municipality and one is an association.

The characteristics that are common in these examples encompass both organizational and personal dimensions. While all organizations that were identified as having an implicit emphasis highlighted the influence of politics, organizations in this scenario were identified as having a predominant emphasis on “constructive” politics. In addition, participants in the project shaper role made a significant contribution to the overall effectiveness of the project initiation process. Those participants in the project

shaper role identified themselves as having agency characterized as “some flexibility.” In addition, they reinforced the political drivers of influence, namely “political savvy,” “proactive communication” and “relationship.” Also emphasized to a lesser extent were “position” and “delegation,” reinforcing influences of positional power and authority as well. Rule environments that were characterized as being somewhat effective draw on constructive political behaviours within the organization, as well as these behaviours being reinforced and exemplified by those individuals playing a project shaper role.

4. Avoidance politics and informal shaper

The fourth scenario explores “avoidance politics and informal shaper.” While the previous scenario dealt with constrained agency and a greater influence of politics, this scenario unfolds a different influence of politics on project initiation. The organization is a large North American university. The participant is a senior project manager within the information technology group of the business school, who is responsible for supporting the initiation and subsequent management of systems development and implementation projects.

The rule environment within the organization is “mostly implicit.” While there is theoretically a formal process, much of the project initiation process is still responsive to implicit drivers:

I feel that the rules of the game are fluid in my organization. We're using a more formal approval process now, but even with that I feel that projects are selected based on who has more political influence rather than on which project will have greatest impact on the organization. (26)

Even while recognizing the influence of politics, there is a level of idealism regarding adopting a more formal process. Discussing the importance of understanding rules, the participant offers, “It is more important to understand and adhere to the explicit rules. Our explicit rules call for formal project initiation processes. As we use the formal processes more often we'll be in a better position to change the implicit rules” (26). The implication here is that politics do in fact currently drive the project initiation process; at the same time, the participant hopes that process will supplant the politics.

While there is theoretically a formal process of project initiation, the organization is described as having “some formality.” In discussing the process, the participant indicated,

It is kind of in the middle of the road in terms of formality. Getting the business case, and producing project charters and plans. It is not as formal as it could be; we are not making decisions purely based upon the business need. Politics has a much higher ranking in terms of the decision. (26)

In terms of consistency, the process is considered “very consistent.” While the process itself is not formal, there is at least adherence to it, where everything that meets the definition of a project is being subject to the process. Overall, however, the process is described as being “not effective.” The participant suggested, “If it was a truly formal process, I would like think the documentation was more used in having a final say” (26). Even though there is theoretically a process in place, in this context it is clear that it is not being used, and that the influence of politics has a much greater role than process in evaluating projects and determining which ones proceed.

In terms of personal drivers of influence, the participant highlights those associated with “reputation” and “diligence,” while recognizing the need for “proactive communication.” There is again an effort to establish a core sense of credibility, of experience working on previous similar projects. The participant’s personal approach in demonstrating influence was characterized as,

Investigate the heck out of what the project will be. Be able to make insights that some people might not expect, and demonstrate an understanding of the business side. Technical credibility is not an issue, it is about demonstrating business understanding. (26)

While seeking to demonstrate understanding and insight, the participant also indicates that communications are something that are managed carefully: “I tend to manage how I give out information about the project; I may not be honest about my unhappiness, for example” (26). The clear emphasis for the participant is being able to demonstrate expertise through credibility and diligence; at the same time there is a tangible frustration with process not being adequately valued.

In discussing the role of politics, and their “strong influence” within this organization, the participant said,

Also a lot of the politics influences process. It drives me crazy, but instead of looking at the merits of the project my supervisor will look at the political power of the people requesting, and decide based upon power to proceed, even if it is not the best use of our time. If, for example, a request comes from the dean, it is more likely to proceed. (26)

While there is a clear and stated desire on the part of the participant to make decisions based upon process and a thorough analysis of the problem, “Politics has a much higher ranking in terms of the decision” (26). The implication of this is that there is a disconnect between the preferred approach of the participant and the political reality that exists within the organization. While there is a sense of optimism about the possibility of process to “fix” the politics, the influence of politics is clearly far greater.

The decision process within the organization is relatively formal, and would be made by the board of trustees. The decision making process is also identified as an issue in terms of its impact on the project initiation process:

The decision would be made, but the board isn’t affected by what doesn’t happen. There is no consideration of the consequences of what will not happen as a result of making a particular decision. Board members are outside of the School—they are not affected by what wouldn’t get done. (26)

The implication is that each project is viewed in isolation, and approved on its own merits, with no consideration for the larger impacts. There is no assessment of the impact of not doing another project, or the overall resource impacts of the projects that are initiated.

The project shaper role is seen as at best “informal” in the context of this organization. In discussing whether a shaper role exists, the participant offered, “No. Typically not. It is not there formally, but it might be informal. It is more looking at it on the technology side, less business analysis” (26). The implication is that there is no role that is responsible for advocacy or influence of the project within the organization.

In this scenario, the agency of the participant is described as having “no flexibility.” There is little influence in the project initiation process, or in what is ultimately

considered in making initiation decisions. In discussing how initiation occurs in actuality, the participant said, "Implicitly, meetings with supervisor regarding the desired project. You have to win him over. Once you've won him over, it typically goes ahead, even if other things don't line up" (26). Politics are exercised and influence is maintained by other people, and decisions are made regardless of their underlying logic or the impact a decision has on other work or projects in the organization. The participant not only does not influence this process, but indicates a sense of powerlessness and frustration with how the process actually does operate.

While there is a strong sense that the participant holds ideals regarding how project initiation should happen and the role that process should play, these aspects ultimately do not influence the initiation of projects in this organization. Politics and relationships are what governs project initiation, not analysis and rigour. Despite this, however, the participant strives to emphasize rigour and competence in supporting the initiation of projects, despite the fact that these are not the drivers that are apparently valued. This is a scenario where lack of agency, resentment of politics and a lack of influence on the process result in a project initiation process that is viewed as not effective, and that is a source of personal frustration for the participant.

Theoretical implications of avoidance politics and informal shaper. Several characteristics appear to contribute in organizations that have an implicit rule system that is not seen to be effective. Nine organizations were described as having an "implicit" rule environment and a rule system that was "not effective." These included four organizations in the education sector, two insurance companies, one financial firm, one retail organization and one aerospace firm.

The characteristics that predominate in this instance are a product of organizational as well as individual influences. Overall, these organizations are described as having political environments characterized by "avoidance" and "disagreement." In addition, the role of project shaper in all of these organizations is described as being "informal." Finally, the participants identify their level of agency as having "no flexibility." The consequence is a situation with ineffective organizational politics, in which individual support in guiding project initiation is not formally recognized

and participants indicate no personal influence or capacity to compensate for the inadequacies of the organization.

What is possibly most important to note about the presence of avoidance politics or an informal shaper role, however, is that where these are both present they appear to override the influence of factors within the organization that otherwise would be characterized as being “implicit emphasis, somewhat effective.” In other words, the presence of an “avoidance” political culture and an “informal shaper” role are sufficient to counter the influence of agency and political drivers that might otherwise support an effective project initiation decision.

5. Formality and process drivers

The fifth scenario explores “formality and process drivers.” Where the previous two scenarios have focussed on implicit influences of project initiation, this scenario evaluates the impact of a more explicit approach. The organization is a large international telecommunications firm. The participant is a senior project director within the information technology division of the organization. Typical projects are large-scale information systems projects, including the development of new technology-based customer services.

The emphasis of the rules system within the organization was described by the participant in the study as “mostly explicit.” While there is an allowance for some implicit rules, and there is recognition that these have had more influence in the past, the organization has evolved in terms of the rigour and scrutiny of project initiation decisions: “Normally implicit rules are more important. However in today's environment, when the organization is looking for a reason to cancel or suspend projects, the explicit rules need to be rigorously followed. The explicit status of projects is too public” (24). The scrutiny that is a product of the current business environment has effectively served to increase the emphasis on explicit, tangible processes in decision making.

Given the explicit focus of the organization, there is also fairly significant emphasis on the processes in place. The process environment is one that the participant reports as having “some formality” in place, saying, “I think it is pretty formal in terms of governance panels. Initiation is not that formal, but we do have a governance committee, and a business case. Dollar level determines delegation levels”

(24). In terms of consistency, the process environment is perceived as being “very consistent”: “Now it is much more stringently controlled. Fifteen to twenty years ago, you would have seen much more discretionary projects” (24). While there is a reasonable degree of formality in place, the participant still describes challenges where projects are initiated due more to political influences: “There have been occasions where the vendor has come up with a wonderful solution, and then you go looking for a problem that it will solve” (24). Overall, however, there is the suggestion that there is a reasonable degree of formality and scrutiny in place in how project initiation decisions are made.

In this context, the participant sees personal influence being a primarily a product of “diligence” and “proactive communications.” While the participant is quite senior and in a technical role, there is less of an emphasis on knowledge than on a need to build understanding and consensus:

I draw boxes, and ask people to build systems to support it. I don’t pretend to know the ins and outs. I meet with people, and ensure that I am seen to support them. If there are things that need to be sorted out, I will support them. If there are show stoppers, then we will work through those together. (24)

The participant describes their approach as, “Initially, just asking questions. Presuming that I know nothing, and asking questions to try and get information and feedback. In identifying that I am starting at ground-zero level there is a tendency for people to be fairly supportive” (24). Credibility is seen as bringing process and knowledge to the table, but constantly framing it from the perspective of the people who are impacted, and based upon their needs.

In this organization, while there is process in place that is being increasingly emphasized, politics still exert a “strong influence.” There is a strong need for political acceptance and to “seek buy-in” in order for projects to be initiated:

You need to have a champion at a high level. Have to do that, and then they can talk to and liaise with their peers, socialize issues, get buy-in. The higher level the buy-in, the greater likelihood that solution will be accepted. Makes it harder to oppose. (24)

Acceptance of projects is seen as a product of both process adherence and political acceptance. Describing the influence of politics, the participant offered,

If you don't have support across the organization then there is a good chance that the project could be in jeopardy if you don't have all your ducks lined up. In other words, you need the formal admin support (a funded business case and current status in green) as well as peer and/or senior management support, for example due to strategic value. (24)

The politics in this organization essentially work hand-in-hand with the process, and both must be respected and supported.

The decision process in this organization is committee-based. As described by the participant, this also has political dimensions, where approval “would be done at governance committee. It is usually brought forward by the project sponsor, that has asked you to run the study. There is a need to get buy-in beforehand; they would liaise with other members before meeting” (24). The political interactions are not always supportive: “Sometimes someone lobs a bomb in; sometimes the sponsor themselves” (24). The implication is that, despite the professed formality, the decision process itself is still subject to a great deal of political influence.

Within this organization, the role of project shaper is recognized as being a “role by sponsor.” There is a clear need to have a high level champion of the project, particularly if there is some risk associated with the project. Recruiting executives into the project shaper role is also subject to political considerations. Discussing the shaper role, the participant offers, “I think they have to be sold to it, it can't be imposed. If they are not sold on it, then they can't champion it. They have to see what the benefits are; you don't want a reluctant champion” (24). The role of champion in this context is important, but the project shaper must be someone who clearly understands and accepts the benefits before he can champion those benefits to others.

In this scenario, the agency of the participant is identified as having “some flexibility.” While this individual is confident in their credibility, there is a very conscious level of awareness of the power structure and the politics that exist within the organization. The participant has an appreciation of the process that is in place, and the need to be seen to be adhering to that process. He also recognizes the role that politics have in the initiation of projects and the on-going maintenance of project support. It is not the influence or power of the participant, however, that drives this support; support

is sustained by working within the process and political environment that is established and maintained by others.

While he does not have political influence, the participant does engage in supporting and stewarding the project through the initiation process for those projects for which he is responsible. The participant brings a strong level of technical and managerial competence, while emphasizing the needs and priorities of stakeholders during the performance of their role. The consultative process, which is highlighted, is very much based in developing workable and technically appropriate solutions that meet stakeholder requirements. This scenario illustrates how moderate levels of agency and adherence to process, as well as to politics, can still produce effective results.

Theoretical implications of formality and process drivers. Where organizations have an explicit process environment but one that is only somewhat effective, the predominant characteristics change to reflect less of an emphasis on process and more of an impact from personal influence. Three organizations were characterized by their participants as having the characteristics of an “explicit” rule environment and an only “somewhat effective” process in place to support the project initiation process; one was a university, one was an international telecommunications organization and one was an insurance company.

The characteristics that are common in these cases encompass both organizational and personal dimensions. The process environment in these types of organizations was characterized as having “some formality” and “some consistency.” While the process of project initiation was not extremely formal, there was a process in place that was adhered to reasonably well on at least a subset of projects. The other predominant characteristic, however, was how those who were guiding and shaping their projects approached their role. What participants in the project shaper role described was an emphasis on the process drivers of influence, namely “diligence,” “experience,” “process” and “reputation.” In other words, they reinforced what process was in place with their own personal emphasis on rigour and process. While not all of the participants here had agency, and those who did characterized it as having only “some flexibility,” they worked within the process and reinforced and emphasized the process through their own behaviours.

6. No formality and unclear process

The sixth and final scenario explores “no formality and unclear process.” While the previous scenario integrated process and politics to produce results, this scenario explores the implications of the absence of process. The organization is a department within a Canadian provincial government. The participant is a director responsible for a major program area within the department. The organization typically undertakes projects to develop, revise and assess programs in support of the departmental mandate.

The participant identified the rule emphasis within the organization as “mostly implicit.” This is largely a result of the lack of clear rules that do exist in terms of project initiation within the organization. When asked to describe how familiar with the rules they are, the participant offered, “That’s hard to answer, because I just transitioned. But fairly well—because there aren’t a lot” (2). There are aspects of process that are in place, and a PMO has been established within the organization, but there is not a great deal of formal process guidance governing the initiation process.

In terms of process, the organization is described as having “little formality.” The initiation process is one that the participant identifies the organization as struggling with, suggesting it is, “Not formal at all. The first formal part is a project charter. A lot of times, the initiation decision has been made prior to doing the project charter. Sometimes the charter is used as the idea document, but a lot of times, “here’s an idea and run with it.” We don’t have a lot of great processes—formal processes—around project initiation” (2). The process is also described as “very inconsistent.” In describing the initiation process, the participant indicated it is, “Probably all over the map. A lot of times we will get told to do something because the premier/deputy/executive said so, and therefore we have to do it” (2). What process does exist is more around formality of project management once a project has been initiated, rather than at the initiation stage. The implication is that, while there is a stated intention of process, actual adherence is low, and the manner by which projects are initiated is largely ad hoc.

In terms of discussing personal influence on the process, the participant highlighted in particular process-based drivers. The primary emphasis in influencing the process is placed on “diligence,” “reputation” and “position.” Much of the criteria for

success is perceived to be about having done the preparatory work necessary to respond to challenges and issues: "Being prepared, doing your homework, anticipating the sorts of questions that might be asked and being prepared for that type of thing" (2). Credibility is in part afforded by position and title, as well as informal and formal collaboration with peers. The consequences are that most of the effort is invested in making sure that the diligence has been done to address challenges and deficiencies, drawing on personal expertise and ability to navigate what process does exist as well as possible.

In addition to informal process, the participant describes an organization that has a fairly significant level of politics. She indicates that politics have a "strong influence": "Tends to have quite a bit. A lot of it is timing related to other projects, and other priorities. Whether pressures become high enough that we may need to work on this" (2). In addition, there can be executive direction regarding what projects will actually be initiated; in discussing the need for executive support for a major initiative, the participant indicated, "You need an ADM [assistant deputy minister], you need the deputy minister. If it is a level higher, if the deputy says we are doing it, then it will get done, whether supported or not" (2). In this context, political and executive priorities have the greatest influence, and what process does exist may be readily circumvented.

The decision making process is by "consensus," where the "executive leads." The discussion involves reviewing a completed presentation, and a decision is often made in the room:

The last slide is the decision. The deputy would lead the discussion with ADMs. The response is either that they need to think and discuss and get back to you, or the decision could be made right in the meeting (more typical in my experience). (2)

The decision making process is also "unclear," in large part as a result of a recent reorganization of the department. What decision making process exists is itself not overly formal, with the participant indicating there is, "Not great decision tracking; or even writing decisions down" (2). Decisions are made through verbal commitments that are not tracked, and for which no formal record may exist.

The role of project shaper is one that is recognized, predominantly as a “role by SME [subject matter expert].” In discussing the project shaper role, the participant identified, “Yes, it’s the work that we do. There is a significant amount that is driven top-down. But there is also bottom-up initiation, given pressures” (2). People are predominantly assigned to the role based upon position, or based upon topic expertise. There is not always a great deal of support, however, for people who are in the project shaper role: “A lot of people are heads down. Not that there is an ill will, but people don’t necessarily spend a lot of time thinking about what other people need” (2). The consequence is an environment where the shaper role, while recognized, is challenged in terms of obtaining credibility and support.

Given the organizational context to date, it is perhaps surprising that in terms of agency this participant identifies “some flexibility.” In large part this is a result of the lack of rules and lack of formality of process, particularly with respect to the initiation process. At the same time, however, agency is constrained by the top-down and political nature that characterizes so much of the organization’s functions, and the imperatives that can frequently be established at an executive level. Alignment is important, and results are important, but there is flexibility in how people go about doing that: “If you don’t use the right form, that’s OK. If you do a 2.5 page briefing note, they will likely still read it” (2). Overall, there is a level of latitude present that can be leveraged, provided one understands and works within the organizational and political constraints.

While there is some agency exhibited by the participant, it is within a very narrow context, and more importantly is limited by a number of other considerations within the organization. The lack of a clear decision making process, the lack of process consistency and minimal formality of process conspire to create a process environment that is characterized as “not effective.” While the participant can attempt to either influence or work around this environment, the level of top-down influence and tendency to either impose or override decisions means that the overall impact of agency is negligible, and may only result in frustration on her part.

Theoretical implications of no formality and unclear process. Within organizations characterized as having an explicit process environment but where the

project initiation process is not effective, there appear to be a number of contributing characteristics. Three organizations were identified as having an “explicit” emphasis while the actual process in place was characterized by participants as “not effective.” One was a government department, and the other two organizations were in the education sector.

The characteristics that predominate in these circumstances all highlight process challenges. The process environment is described as having “little formality” and “no consistency.” In other words, while there is a stated emphasis on applying formality in the process of project initiation, there is neither a process in place nor any resulting consistency. In addition, the process of decision making in these instances is “arbitrary” and “unclear.” There is again a variation in agency, with participants indicating “no flexibility” or “some flexibility,” but what flexibility exists is not sufficient to compensate for the inadequacies and organizational challenges that appear to exist. The ineffectiveness of the process constrains the ability for even some agency to have a lasting and significant influence.

Insights from initiation scenarios

The scenarios that have been outlined above illustrate the range of practices that have been observed by participants in describing the project initiation processes within their organizations. More importantly, they illustrate how the various concepts highlighted in this study work together to enhance, support or disable the process of decision making about project initiation. Overall, they provide a comprehensive view of how the management of project initiation processes is being attempted to be addressed within organizations. They collectively paint a picture of how agency, politics and processes intertwine, and how individuals within those organizations respond.

The scenarios that have been described are largely proxies for the other cases that are included in the study, and the dimensions and concepts that are being explored here represent the same dynamics that play out in the other participant descriptions. These cases have been selected for their representativeness in highlighting specific issues, but for each participant description that was chosen, several more waited in the wings as viable alternatives. Perhaps most importantly, there are few if any aspects of

the other examples that make them significant outliers. What has been described as particular in one scenario is generally representative of other related scenarios.

Negative Case

The theoretical framework that has been presented in this section is strongly supported by the majority of participant descriptions that were collected as a part of conducting this study. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out, not all theories are perfect and at times cases will exist that do not support, or in fact will refute, the data within a study. In their words, “Looking for the negative case provides for a fuller exploration of the dimensions of a concept. It adds richness to explanation and points out that life is not exact and that there are always exceptions to points of view” (2008, p. 84). So it is with this study, where there is one negative case which not only refutes one basis of theory, but also helps to illuminate and further explain how a portion of the theory may in fact operate (and indeed, may be able to be overcome).

The case in question is a participant who is a director within a North American university. He is a member of the executive team within his department, reporting directly to the dean, and is responsible for the initiation and oversight of all of the projects conducted within that department.

The emphasis of the rule environment within the organization is described as “implicit”; there are, in fact very few written procedures or processes regarding project initiation. As a result, the processes are described as having “little formality” and “moderate consistency.” Politics has a “strong influence,” and is described by the participant as, “Absolutely huge. Worse on some, but absolutely in all” (22). Politics are also heavily culturally influenced, and place great emphasis on collaboration, consultation and accommodating individual viewpoints. In the words of the participant,

You need to work and build a consensus—try to appease different points of view. Understand objectives and motivations. Most people will move off their point at times and see a larger good. It makes it extremely difficult when starting projects involving faculty. (22)

There is also a strong level of “avoidance” characterized within the political environment. The decision environment is one where the dean of the department ultimately decides: “He does try to get consensus. Would look for general agreement.

But ultimately, if he says yes, it is a go” (22). The role of project shaper is varied; it is moderately formally recognized, but also described as having a number of challenges: “It’s a diverse group—there may be people initially supportive, and some who aren’t. The champion will have to work with all of the various groups to try and build consensus” (22). The level of agency is described as one of “no flexibility.” Overall, the implicit emphasis, lack of agency, presence of avoidance politics and the relatively informal role of project shaper would suggest that this organization be characterized as “Implicit emphasis, not effective.” There are factors in place within this case, however, that make the results more effective than a surface description of the organization offers.

The difference in this case is how the participant in this scenario approaches the project shaper role. The environment that the participant describes is a difficult one politically. In discussing the politics within the organization, the participant offers that it “can be extremely challenging. As administration, I’m a second class citizen” (22). This person’s observations on the importance of working within the rules is also relevant: “In this environment, I can’t get into anything but trouble by initiating something on my own, without consensus and agreement of my colleagues” (22). Despite perception of minimal agency and the relatively difficult and obstructive environment, however, the participant in this scenario has found strategies to be effective in his role.

The significance of the approach that this particular participant adopts is highlighted by the drivers of personal influence that he identifies. There is an emphasis on “reputation,” which is defined less as a track record of technical expertise than it is an emphasis on personal integrity:

Being very careful to try to keep personal integrity. One of the things I find—be careful about, if promising something, make sure that you can deliver on it. Don’t try to get yourself in a position where you are making conflicting promises to different people. (22)

The participant engages in proactive communications, which in part means, “I will listen a lot” (22). There is a dimension of political savvy, characterized by, “Very careful not to push, not to embarrass, keep plugging away” (22). In describing his approach, the participant indicates:

I think people have different ways. In my case... quiet persistence. I will listen a lot. I will look for things that can be done to help. Work to make their life a little bit easier. Help do what we need to do. Make sure we deliver or over-deliver. (22)

Despite an organization that could be considered very negative, and despite the lack of agency or perception of any flexibility, the participant has found a strategy to make things work and move from “not effective” to “somewhat effective” through an approach that can best be described—to use their own words—as “quiet persistence.”

The importance of this negative case is that it reinforces that there is in fact another dimension of personal influence than just “agency” in how people approach the project shaper role; there is also a question of the strategies they adopt, and the personal drivers underlying those strategies. While the influence of the personal drivers is highlighted in the theoretical framework as outlined earlier, there they are presented in a context where personal drivers of influence augment agency. In this particular example, personal drivers of influence in fact compensated for a lack of agency. What the theoretical framework suggests should be a less effective environment has been compensated for by the personal approach of an individual who cares enough to work to make a difference despite the constraints with which they are faced.

Theoretical Discussion

As noted in the methodological discussion, the focus of the study evolved through the course of investigation and analysis, as agency emerged as a core influence on how participants perceived their roles within their organizations and how they interacted with their rule environments. Both the emergence of agency as a concept, and the reinforcement of the influence of rules systems, strongly shaped the results of the study. This section explores current empirical research in the areas of agency and social rule systems, and examines the contributions of this study in the context of the current literature.

Explorations of Agency

Agency as a concept is broadly explored in the literature from a number of different perspectives. The dual themes of agency and structure have been the focus of an ongoing debate amongst institutional theorists, with one side arguing for the increasing isomorphism of organizations over time and the other arguing for agency as

a vehicle for discretion in approaches through acts of deviance or institutional entrepreneurship (Heugens & Lander, 2009). A number of studies continue to explore agency theory in the context of the principal agent problem (Eisenhardt, 1989b), and in particular the exploration of pay and incentive structures in order to better align the interests of agents with those of broader organizational stakeholders (see, for example, Chng, Rodgers, Shih, & Song, 2012; Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Mooney, 2005; O'Reilly & Main, 2010; Simsek, Heavey, & Veiga, 2010). These studies begin to introduce an understanding of personal characteristics of the agent in encouraging effective behaviours, including suggestions that executives with higher core self evaluations have a stronger influence on entrepreneurial orientation than those with lower core self evaluations (Simsek et al., 2010), and that in the face of declining firm performance those executives with higher core self evaluations are motivated by incentive pay structures, while those with lower core self evaluations find incentive pay structures debilitating (Chng et al., 2012). These findings begin to pave the way for an improved understanding of the relationships between agent personality and the willingness to engage in agentic behaviours.

One of the key findings of this study is the influence of personality on the practice of agency in the context of project initiation decisions. There are a few studies that have in recent years explicitly explored the relationship between personality and agency (see, for example, Davies et al., 2010; de Boer & Zandberg, 2012; Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Ward, Thorn, Clements, Dixon, & Sanford, 2006). Agency has been inferred to correlate directly with personality, with “masculine” traits being explicitly identified as proxies for agency (Ward et al., 2006). Ghaed and Gallo (2006) explore the degree to which the concepts of agency and communion interact with and mitigate each other; using questionnaires of traits and attributes, they suggest that agency has a focus on dominance and achievement and that it correlates positively to extroversion and inversely with neuroticism within the Five Factor Model. In a conceptual paper, Davies et al. (2010) propose similar correlations of agency and personality, suggesting that willingness to engage in agency depends upon power, personality and orientation to uncertainty; they suggest again that agency is positively correlated with extroversion, negatively correlated with neuroticism and also to an extent influenced by

agreeableness and conscientiousness. In an exploration of agency in the performance of simply routine behaviours, de Boer and Zandberg (2012) suggest a positive correlation with neuroticism, suggesting that willingness to “break the rules” is a product of irritability. Overall, these findings do suggest that a relationship exists between agency and personality.

Further studies explore the relationship between personality and job performance, as well as between agency and stewardship, politics and behavioural decision making. A meta-analysis of previous studies exploring the relationship between personality and job performance suggested that the highest correlation to performance was with the Five Factor Model of conscientiousness, while managerial roles also had a slight correlation with extroversion (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). These findings were reinforced in a comprehensive meta-analysis by Ones et al. (2007), who also suggest that extroversion and conscientiousness strongly influence performance for managers. Schepers, Falk, de Ruyter, de Jong, and Hammerschmidt (2012) identify a strong influence between agency and stewardship, suggesting agency is a product of problem ownership and responsibility on the part of actors. Shi, Chen and Zhou (2011) suggest a linkage between proactive personality and job performance, mediated by political skills. Finally, while arguing that the link between behavioural decision making and agency has not yet been formally integrated, Wiseman and Gomez-Mejia (1998) suggest that risk-taking in agency is a product of governance and monitoring. These studies expand on the notions of factors that influence agency and the role that personality may contribute.

Despite the discussions above, however, the specific contribution of personality to the exercise of agency is still very much inferred in most of the recent literature. A number of the papers arguing for linkages between personality and agency are theoretical in nature (Davies et al., 2010; Shi et al., 2011; Wiseman & Gomez-Mejia, 1998). Still others infer a relationship between personality and agency (Ward et al., 2006), or have established a link through self-report assessment of attributes (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006) or meta-analyses of personality and job performance (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Ones et al., 2007). While de Boer and Zandberg (2012) did engage in an empirical assessment of the exercise of agency, they were examining a situation in

which prescribed rules on tasks that were presumed to be rigorously adhered to were being deliberately broken, rather than an exploration of roles where there was an assumed freedom to act. The implication is that while many studies posit a relationship between personality and agency exists, there are few instances where this has been empirically demonstrated. This study would appear to make an important contribution in demonstrating a linkage between personality and agency where the actor does in fact have the freedom and opportunity to engage in a range of potential responses.

Exploration of Agency and Roles

One other aspect of agency highlighted by this study is the level at which it is exercised. The project initiation process is unique in that it lives in a middle space between organizational strategy and project management; before project initiation is the development of strategic direction and after are the often rational and control-oriented processes of project management. As has been demonstrated in this study, some actors in the project shaper role are at executive levels, although not all of these exhibit high levels of agency; many, however, are at a mid-management or project management level of their organization, and yet are still charged with stewarding the initiation of strategically important initiatives. This creates an interesting opportunity to explore agency at a different level than that at which it has more traditionally been examined.

The traditional perspective on agency theory is that it involves executive- and board-level dynamics. A survey of agency theory literature highlighted that the dominant traditional focus of agency studies was on influences of executive compensation, behaviours of self interest, and organizational dynamics—particularly with respect to executive motivation (Eisenhardt, 1989b). Later empirical explorations include an understanding of the influence of executive job demands on behaviours and motivation (Hambrick et al., 2005), perceptions of executive motivation on job performance (Simsek et al., 2010), the influence of executive mental-models on decision making (Gary & Wood, 2011), and explorations of executive compensation related to power and influence (O'Reilly & Main, 2010). The result is a dominant viewpoint of executives as those who exercise agency, in their role as agents who are accountable to principals that are typically represented by the board.

The other dominant emphasis on agent theory in recent empirical literatures is in exploring the dynamics of the board itself. This has included explorations of the challenges in ensuring the attainment of performance and alignment with the board of directors, and configuring members of the board as “agents” in relationship to shareholder “principals” (Vandewaerde, Voordeckers, Lambrechts, & Bammens, 2011). Agency theory is seen as a lens to provide much-needed further insight into the performance and operation of boards (Huse, Hoskisson, Zattoni, & Viganò, 2011). It has been used as a lens to support understanding of governance practices (Heracleous & Lan, 2012), and explorations of the role of the board of directors in principal and agent constructs (Lan & Heracleous, 2010). Again, the predominant focus in exploring agency has been at the highest levels within the organization structure.

By contrast, this study explored and identified the existence and operational use of agency at comparatively much lower levels of the organization, including in mid-level and project-based management. One of the closest alignments of the findings of this study with recent empirical discussions is that of Martynov (2009), who explored the dynamics of agency and stewardship in emphasizing managerial self-interest over stewardship and organizational interests; the suggestion by Martynov, however, was that those acting as “agents” operated from a self-interested perspective rather than serving organizational self interests. This contrasts with the findings of this study, where those exercising highest levels of agency in supporting the initiation of projects were doing so to help ensure that organizational interests were met, and in the process compensating for inadequacies in organizational processes and rule systems. Possibly most relevant to the study are the findings of Miller and Sardais (2011), who explored the role of executives in adopting stewardship approaches that were more generally associated with organizational principles. What this study demonstrates is that those exercising the greatest degrees of agency are most commonly adopting a role of stewardship that aligns with the observations of Miller and Sardais (2011), but that the exercise of significant levels of agency is not solely at the executive level; it is also exercised by those in a mid-level or project-management role.

Explorations of Rules & Routines

The literature associated with the evolutionary theory of the firm as originally proposed by Nelson and Winter (1982) has resulted in a diversity of perspectives, with some researchers within this tradition exploring the role of “routines,” and others exploring those of “rules” (Becker, 2005). Becker (2005) discussed the comparatively small amount of empirical investigation into the nature of routines. Despite the relative scarcity, there are some useful studies which serve to illuminate the current literature and provide some perspective in interpreting the results of this study. In particular, a number of studies have explored the role of agency in the context of routines and rule following.

A significant contribution to the study of routines has been made by Martha S. Feldman (2000; 2003; 2004; Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002), based upon an intensive investigation of a university department. This has included explorations of how changes in routines are in part a result of how actors perceive changes in their roles (Feldman, 2000), how changes in routine are themselves a result of changes in performance and changes in understanding of the organization (Feldman, 2003), and how changes in structure, process and intent can result in resistance and subversion on the part of actors that are motivated by both positive and negative intents (Feldman, 2004). In addition, Howard-Grenville (2005) suggested that agency was a product of power and position and the confidence of actors in the routines in which they were engaged. Each of these studies serves to support a greater degree of understanding of how actors are able to engage in agency in the context of organizational routines.

Additional studies that support the relationship between agency and rule following or routines include investigations of pro-social rule breaking behaviour, routines as means of reducing uncertainty and routines supporting mindful versus mindless decision making. A study by Morrison (2006) suggested that agency as evidenced by rule-breaking could be a functional behaviour in service of the larger goals of the organization, finding that such behaviours required both perceptions of autonomy and also a propensity for risk-taking behaviours. Becker and Knudsen (2005) found that the establishment of routines was a positive strategy for managing in the face of pervasive uncertainty. Finally, Espedal (2006) found that organizations have multiple

realities formed by conflicting interests and coalitions; in this context, in the face of uncertainties that were not fully addressed by routines, success was a product of situations where actors were willing and able to address and counter problems (seen as being “mindful”) or continued to reinforce previous patterns in a more “mindless” fashion. These studies advance the concept of agency as being a positive mediator of organizational routines, particular when actors are faced with situations of novelty, complexity and uncertainty, all of which typically are operative in project initiation decisions.

One of the key findings of this study related to the role of agency in contributing to the effectiveness of project decisions. Recent studies have provided some additional support for the role of agency as a functional means of mediating organizational routines and rule systems, particularly in the context of situations where organizational capabilities are ineffective or situations have changed. While Becker and Knudsen (2005) argued for routines as a means of managing pervasive uncertainty, Feldman (2004) and Espedal (2006) argued for the role of agency in the face of inappropriate routines or changing contexts. Morrison (2006) reinforced the suggestion that agency through “pro-social rule breaking” could be an effective strategy for furthering organizational goals. Each of these findings supports and reflects the results of this study regarding the role of “strong agency.” This study also provides support for instances where agency may in fact need to be constrained in the case of very effective organizational routines and rule systems, and suggests that where actors perceive a lack of agency it may be a product of inappropriate strategies or a perception of external constraints, rather than the mindlessness suggested by Espedal (2006). Finally, while the study supports the observations of Howard-Grenville (2005) that agency is a product of power and position, it also advances the role of personality as being of significant influence.

Contributions to Understanding Agency and Rules

Based upon a review of the current literature, it would appear that this study provides a number of contributions to the literature associated with both agency and rule systems. This study highlighted the influence of personality in the exercising of agency in project initiation decisions, providing evidence of an association that was

presumed but not empirically demonstrated in current studies. In addition, the study supported the role of agency as a mediating influence in situations of uncertainty, complexity, or inappropriate organizational routines, as observed in several recent studies. It also demonstrated circumstances where agency is constrained in the face of very effective organizational rule systems and where the perception of agency is limited as a result of perceptions of personal limitations or external constraints. Overall, this study provides a contribution to our understanding of the exercise of agency and the influence of rule systems in organizations, particularly through the lens of project initiation, which constitutes a complex, strategically important but uncertain decision environment.

The study also contributes to a further understanding of rule systems as originally advanced by Burns and Dietz, and explored in Chapter 3 – Decision Making. Dietz and Burns (1992) viewed rule systems as dynamic, complex and at times contradictory. They observed that rules helped to create meaning and make observations interpretable (Burns & Dietz, 1992). In particular, Dietz and Burns (1992) defined the criteria that defined in order to attribute agency to a social actor. The results of this study align with many of these principles. In particular, the dynamic nature of rule systems and their relevance in creating meaning and understanding were strongly illustrated. Differences were observed regarding compliance with the criteria required to attribute agency, however. As discussed in Chapter 5, only those actors who demonstrated "considerable flexibility" in their role could be considered to meet all of the criteria; those with only "some flexibility" often perceived limitations on their ability to act and on the perceived range of options available to them. Those identified as having "no flexibility" met none of the criteria of agency defined by Dietz and Burns (1992). The result is that while agency is a predominant theme in the study results, and provides a valuable lens through which to view decision making, its presence and how it is operationalized is more complex than was originally suggested.

Concluding Discussion

This chapter has explored several scenarios that illustrate how the supporting concepts emerging from this study interact with the idea of agency to illustrate the full range of practices that were observed and described by participants within this study.

Some organizations have processes that are characterized by very consistent and very formal processes, where agency is as a result constrained but the process is nonetheless seen as effective. Other organizations were described as having inadequate processes or excesses of politics that were compensated for by participants who, in playing the role of project shaper, were able to exercise strong agency. Some organizations were described as having moderately effective processes, where elements of agency were able to be applied to overcome inadequacies of process or were able to successfully augment scenarios of constructive politics. Finally, organizations with ineffective processes and inappropriate rule systems were described, where an absence of agency or an excess of arbitrariness and inconsistency resulted in what were characterized as ineffectual initiation decisions.

The chapter also revisited the literature to understand the contributions of recent empirical investigations of agency and rule systems, and how these relate to the findings that emerged from the study as the investigation and analysis of the results evolved. A revisiting of the literature suggests that this study contributes to being able to empirically demonstrate a link between personality and agency that has been inferred or proposed in other studies. It would also appear that this study reinforces the role of agency as a strong modifier of rule systems in the face of uncertainty or inadequate organizational processes, but that it also provides empirical evidence that particularly effective rule system environments can constrain agency, and that the perception of agency by actors can be limited through perceived internal inadequacies or external constraints.

Chapter 8 - Conclusions

Introduction

In conducting this study, I have explored the influences of individuals on the process of project initiation. In doing so, I have expanded on the work of Smith and Winter (2010) by demonstrating the presence of the project shaper role and the various concepts and categories that are operationalized by those performing the role in a broad array of organizations. More importantly, I have built on this understanding in order to develop a theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on project initiation decision effectiveness. The results contribute to the understanding of agency and the operation of rules in initiating projects, and provide practitioners with guidance about how to effectively support and champion an idea through the process of making project initiation decisions.

This chapter presents the conclusions of this study. In the first section, I revisit the research questions that ultimately focussed this study. The next section explores its contributions, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The third section examines the limitations of the research that has been conducted, in the context of both the approach that was adopted and the findings that emerged. The fourth section identifies the opportunities for further research that have been inspired by the current study. Finally, in the last section I briefly touch on the implications that doing this research have had for me as an individual.

Revisiting the Research Questions

As with most grounded theory studies, the research questions for this study evolved through the collection and analysis of the data and developing substantive grounded theory regarding how agency and rule emphasis influence the effectiveness of project initiation decisions. From an initial emphasis on the role of power, personality and rules on the process of project initiation, the following research questions ultimately emerged:

- How do individuals perceive the process of project initiation?
- What influences these perceptions?

- What are the perceived influences on decision making process effectiveness?
- How do personal and structural influences shape the making of effective project initiation decisions?

This research study drew for its methodological approach on a Straussian interpretation of grounded theory. Open and axial coding provided answers to the first two questions: “How do individuals perceive the process of project initiation?” and “What influences these perceptions?”. The answers to these questions provided an insight into the phenomenon of project initiation and the key dimensions perceived by participants. Participants’ reports on their perceptions were unquestionably influenced by the study’s adoption of a semi-structured interview approach that at the outset utilized an interview guide that was, in turn, influenced by the literature review that informed this study. What resulted was participants’ identification of the various aspects of project initiation that they felt reflected on how projects were initiated within their organizations; these merged into a number of phenomenological categories that included discussions of the “ability to influence” the initiation process, the “agreement to initiate” projects, the “formality of approach” utilized in the project initiation process, the resulting “clarity of decision,” the “information to initiate” that was prepared as part of the initiation process, the “value of decision” that must be demonstrated, and the “overall rule environment” by which projects were initiated. From these general categories came the insights that facilitated answers to the first two research questions, as reported in Chapter 4.

The question “What are the perceived influences on decision making process effectiveness?” was answered through the process of substantive coding, which ultimately identified the core category and related concepts that supported the development of the substantive theory resulting from this study. In particular, a core category of “agency” highlighted the degree to which participants saw themselves as having direct personal influence on the effectiveness of project initiation decisions. While some participants saw themselves as having considerable influence and autonomy, which was identified as “strong agency” within this study, other participants viewed their autonomy and flexibility as being constrained by the presence of very strong and very formal processes governing the initiation process. Still others perceived

limited ability to influence the decision making process, which they attributed to personal limitations or external constraints. This was discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

The final question, “How do personal and structural influences shape the making of effective project initiation decisions?” was answered through the development of a substantive theory of the influence of agency and rule emphasis on the effectiveness of project initiation decisions, as presented in Chapter 6. The theory highlights the influence of agency, and the degree to which agency either augments perceived inadequacies within the rule system or is constrained by instances of particular process effectiveness. The theory also discusses the influences that emerged from the study that shape process effectiveness, rule effectiveness and agency, where:

- process effectiveness is influenced by process formality, process consistency, decision making process clarity, and the presence of personal influences on the part of participants that emphasize the process aspects of project initiation;
- rule effectiveness is influenced by the personal influences on the part of participants that emphasize the political aspects of project initiation, and is negatively influenced by the presence of negative politics in the decision making process and the informality of the project shaper role;
- agency is influenced by the position, decision making involvement and personality of the participant.

The implications of the theory were “tested” in Chapter 7 through a discussion of several scenarios drawn from the participant descriptions. The identification of a negative case also helped to further highlight the theory and identify possible considerations for its future development.

Study Contributions

This study makes a number of contributions to theory on both theoretical and empirical grounds. While by its nature the study was focussed on the development of substantive theory, and in particular an exploration of the personal influences on the project initiation process, there are several insights and perspectives that can be drawn from the study results that are important on both theoretical and practical levels.

Theoretical Contributions

The design of this study drew on a number of theoretical foundations that collectively helped to define the dimensions of the project initiation decision process, the personal influences that individuals might have within these processes, and the forces that individuals might be subjected to within an organization. In particular, the study was shaped by an understanding of strategic decision process (Fredrickson, 1986; Fredrickson & Mitchell, 1984), the role of routines in decision making (Eisenhardt, 1989b), and social rules systems (Burns & Dietz, 1992; Dietz & Burns, 1992). As the study progressed, the role of agency—as explored in earlier research (Eisenhardt, 1989a) and particularly in the context of its presence in organizational rule systems (Dietz & Burns, 1992)—also became significant.

Exploration of the project initiation decision. This study makes an important contribution to the project management and strategy literature by opening up the black box of the project initiation decision and demonstrating how individuals, processes and structures interact. The critical importance of initiation decisions has been explored (Williams & Samset, 2010), and the need to further investigate the integration of strategy and project management initiation has been identified by several researchers (Artto, Kujala, Dietrich, & Martinsuo, 2008; Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2008; Maylor, 2001; Milosevic & Srivannaboon, 2006; Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, & Rura-Polley, 2003; Shenhar, Dvir, Levy, & Maltz, 2001). In particular, there have been calls to address psychological bias and deception (Flyvbjerg, 2009), subjective rationality (Packendorff, 1995), the role of advocacy (Winter, Smith, Morris, & Cicmil, 2006), and issues of power, ambiguity and paradox (van Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk, 2008) as they relate to strategy and project management. This study introduced decision making theory to the project management realm to understand, in ways that have not previously been explored, how strategic project initiation decisions are made. It specifically addressed rational and subjective areas of decision making, the influence of personal and psychological biases, and aspects of power and ambiguity, in order to provide a more comprehensive view of the project initiation process. These decision making influences would be equally relevant in the domains of program management, portfolio management, escalation and project governance. As a result, by introducing another

important area of management theory, this study provided an additional theoretical dimension for the exploration of how initiation decisions are made.

Role of project shaper. In exploring the project initiation process, this study drew on the project management literature, and particularly the work of Smith and Winter (2010) in exploring the project shaper role and the skills and attributes associated with this role. This study demonstrated that the project shaper role was present, at least informally, in each organization. It also served to reinforce the attributes initially identified by Smith and Winter for the project shaper role, while expanding on them to include the influence of rule systems and particularly that of agency on the part of actors. The study showed that while the role of project shaper was universally present, how the role was operationalized and the formality of the role varied considerably. The agency of actors within the role has a significant influence on the effectiveness of initiation decisions, as do the effectiveness of the processes and rule systems in place.

Understandings of agency in influencing rule systems. As discussed by Eisenhardt (1989a), agency theory is concerned with resolving the problem of conflicts of goals between principal and agent, and the appropriate sharing of risk. Dietz and Burns (1992) explore the role of agency theory in the context of social rules systems, identifying four tests for agency that provide dimensions by which agency may exist or be constrained. This study provides empirical illustrations of when agency as proposed by Dietz and Burns was able to be exercised. The findings also support more recent empirical studies on the role of agency in rule systems, and particularly the work of Feldman (2000; 2003; 2004) and Espedal (2006), who identified the role of agency in managing uncertainty and compensating for perceived inadequacies of organizational rule systems. The study also aligned with the findings of Morrison (2006), who suggested that the breaking of rules could provide positive support for attainment of the goals of the organization. In addition to being able to demonstrate the positive impact of agency as argued for in the above studies, the study also provides a contribution through demonstrating the ability of agency to be constrained in the face of very formal and consistent processes, or to be perceived as limited as a result of personal attributes or external constraints.

Personality influences on agency. The study also suggests that agency is not strictly a concept that is structurally negotiated through position and authority, as has been suggested by Howard-Grenville (2005), but is also personally perceived to exist based upon the personality of the actor. Those who perceive themselves as having high levels of agency are more likely to be extroverted, and to be particularly extroverted-thinking by nature. This provides empirical support to previous studies, which have proposed a link between personality and agency (Ward, Thorn, Clements, Dixon, & Sanford, 2006), have identified a relationship through self-report assessment of traits and attributes (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006), or have conducted meta-analyses of personality and larger constructs of job performance (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007).

Role influences on agency. The study has contributed two additional perspectives regarding agency; these are associated with role status and role emphasis within the organization. While traditional views of agency focussed on executive level responsibilities (Gary & Wood, 2011; Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Mooney, 2005; O'Reilly & Main, 2010; Simsek, Heavey, & Veiga, 2010; Wiseman & Gomez-Mejia, 1998) and board accountabilities (Heracleous & Lan, 2012; Huse, Hoskisson, Zattoni, & Viganò, 2011; Lan & Heracleous, 2010; Vandewaerde, Voordeckers, Lambrechts, & Bammens, 2011), this study clearly identified the presence of agency in participants performing in a mid-management or project-management role. In addition, while views of agency have been cited by some as emphasizing self-interest over organizational needs (Martynov, 2009), the observations of this study found that participants exercising high levels of agency are in fact adopting a stewardship orientation related to furthering organizational objectives. While these findings did correlate with the observations of Miller and Sardais (2011), theirs were again focussed on the interaction of board and executive-level actors. This study demonstrates that those exercising high levels of agency do so in support of realizing organizational objectives, and in doing so often are compensating for inadequacies in organizational processes and rule systems; it also strongly reinforces that exhibiting agency is not solely the domain of executives or the board, but is in fact operationalized by mid-management and project-level actors.

Exploration of phenomenon of "strategic lying". The findings of Flyvbjerg et al (2002, 2003, 2005) highlight the presence of a phenomenon they refer to as "strategic lying." While this phenomenon is characterized as being the result of psychological tendencies (particularly that of optimism bias) and political behaviours (emphasizing the underestimation of costs and the overestimation of benefits) little evidence has been provided of the underlying drivers of how and why this phenomenon occurs. This study provides an explanation of the organizational and individual drivers that underlie the phenomenon of "strategic lying." In particular, the study highlights the presence of organizational and individual influences, and how these dimensions intersect in different organizational configurations. The study also expands on the findings of Bourne (Bourne and Walker 2003; Bourne 2005; Bourne 2009; Bourne 2011a; Bourne 2011b) with respect to strategies for stakeholder engagement and "managing upwards." It provides an exploration of those contexts where stakeholder engagement is proactively pursued by individuals as well as in process-based organizational contexts, as well as identifying the more obstructive political environments where effective stakeholder engagement is undermined.

Practical Contributions

In addition to making a number of theoretical contributions, this study has a significant amount of practical guidance to offer, particularly for those who are involved in the project initiation process within their organizations. The study offers important insights for executives who influence, define and maintain the rule environment within their organizations, particularly with respect to project initiation. In particular, however, the study offers guidance to those who assume the role of project shaper, and support the initiation of individual projects.

Implications for Executives

For executives, the insights of the study emphasize the development and reinforcement of the rule environment within the organization. As has already been observed, rule systems—whether implicit or explicit—operate at varying levels of effectiveness within organizations. The study offers considerations for executives from several key perspectives:

Role in establishing and maintaining the rule system. Executives, through explicit direction or implicit behaviour, create and shape the rule systems in their organizations. As the study has demonstrated, many of the challenges in projects have to do with the clarity of the overall initiation process, how decisions are made within that process, and the degree to which the project shaper role is formally recognized. While implicit processes may be perceived as desirable in order to maintain flexibility and responsiveness, providing clarity about the process and its expectations—and the criteria for initiation decisions—can help those who shape projects to provide better and more effective input into the process. Work in the initiation process can focus on what is necessary to answer relevant questions at an appropriate level of detail, without repetitive rework and deferrals. At the same time, clarity of expectations means that participants in the process can better recognize when some projects may not proceed forward, eliminating the need to waste time trying to justify projects that are conceptual non-starters. In all instances, these changes would result in greater clarity, efficiency and transparency of the decision making process itself.

Participation in the political environment. The study has clearly illustrated the role that politics plays in the project initiation process. While politics is a dominant feature in the majority of participant descriptions, of particular significance is the number of examples of obstructive political environments, particularly in terms of avoidance and disagreement. Attention to the political environment, and endeavouring to provide constructive and positive discussion about points of contention, would make a significant impact on the ability of many study participants to effectively perform their roles.

Managing conflicting messages in partially implemented rule systems. In many participant organizations, the process of project initiation was relatively new or still in the process of implementation. For these organizations, there was often a level of conflict perceived between legacy implications and new process expectations. Consciously attending to changes in expectations, particularly in the change from one rule regime to another, would create a much more transparent environment. While change management challenges cannot be avoided, they can be ameliorated.

Implications for Project Shapers

In the context of this study, the most significant findings—and the far greater challenges—exist for the project shapers. Very few participants in the study indicated that the process of project initiation within their organization was very effective. The vast majority of organizations described by participants had project initiation processes that could be best described as “not effective.” The study offers a number of areas of guidance for those who are involved in the project shaper role.

Presence of the role. Perhaps the most important insight to emerge from this study is that there actually is a role called “project shaper.” Every participant acknowledged the role as existing to some degree, although in some organizations it was viewed as being relatively informal. It is also a role that is variously played by sponsors, project managers and subject matter experts. The objective of the project shaper is to guide the project and provide support and encouragement through the project initiation process. It is a role that combines aspects of champion, steward and advocate, supporting the project while ensuring that the project meets the stated objectives of the organization. By recognizing the role, we begin to provide people with the insight, support and guidance necessary to perform it effectively.

Informality of the role. The role of project shaper tends to be most informal in organizations that do not have a well-formed and effective rule system to support the process of project initiation. Not only does the small amount of process that is in place provide minimal guidance, there is often little recognition or consistency in how project initiation occurs. The political environment often creates its own challenges, resulting in the initiation of any given project requiring even more effort, and likely facing even greater significant levels of scrutiny. When the role is informal, the study indicates, it is more difficult to perform, as there is less support and a greater level of political uncertainty.

The intertwined role of politics and process. One of the important insights of the study is the degree to which politics and process are intertwined. The majority of participants indicated that politics had a strong influence on the project initiation process. Many participants indicated some level of process governing the approach to project initiation, although in many instances these were early, formative and

inconsistently adhered to. Processes of varying degrees of formality were identified even where the rule emphasis within the organization was implicit rather than explicit. This indicates that the project shaper needs to clearly delineate between whether an implicit or explicit rule system is in place and the degree to which the political environment is constructive rather than antagonistic. One of the critical tasks of the project shaper is recognizing the political environment within the organization, and aligning his or her approach appropriately.

The role of agency in project initiation. A significant finding of this study has been with respect to the role of agency in supporting the process of project initiation. Agency, or the perceived flexibility by which participants believe they are able to act, is what enables individual actors to work within, around or outside of the rule environment of the organization in order to successfully support the project initiation process. Participants have been able to contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of the rule system depending upon the process environment, influence of politics and rule system emphasis within the organization. The role of agency can at times support the system in place, and in other contexts may compensate for inadequacies of process or challenges of politics.

The opposing influence of high levels of formality and consistency. While the study has identified the significant role that agency can play in influencing the project initiation process, it also shows that agency has the potential to work counterproductively. In organizations with very formal and very consistent initiation processes, the rule system is in effect defined by the process environment. The high levels of rigour and expectations of adherence also suggest that the organization will not look favourably upon those who work around or at cross purposes with the process. In this context, participants indicated that much less flexibility was available, and described much more circumscribed instances where agency was constrained. In the face of difficult politics and little recognition of the formal role, assuming high levels of agency may represent a high-risk proposition. In other words, while agency can compensate for inadequate process and inappropriate politics, there are also scenarios where the use of agency is inappropriate.

Limitations

For all the contributions that this study makes to better understanding the influence of agency and rule systems on the project initiation process, it also contains a number of inherent limitations. The study was designed to develop a substantive theory of how personal influences support the project initiation process within organizations. One of the inherent limitations is that personal influences are only one aspect of many that influence project initiation decisions. The larger process framework of project initiation exists between the worlds of strategic planning on one side and project management on the other. The management of this interface is not well understood, and this study only contributes one perspective on how projects are initiated within organizations. Although the insights generated by the current study will be helpful to understand personal influences in project initiation decisions, other questions still remain unanswered.

Other limitations exist within the process of how the study itself was conducted. The selection of participants was in part guided by the requirements of the study, and participants who were actively involved in the project initiation process in their organization were specifically sought. As recommended by Creswell (1998), this reflects “theory based sampling,” or “theoretical sampling” in the context and terminology of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). There are also, however, aspects to the sampling strategy that were entirely opportunistic; the people who participated were ones who volunteered. While a small number of participants were excluded who had no involvement or insight into the project initiation process, I otherwise accepted participation from all who volunteered, and gratefully accepted their input. This has a consequence for the generalizability of the results without further testing; while the results met the tests of theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998), further exploration of the results that emerged—particularly regarding the influence of politics and agency—as well as the participation from several individuals within each organization—rather than just one—would provide further insights.

A final limitation that is important to mention is with respect to the process of data collection. As mentioned by Suddaby (2006), the quality of the contact between the researcher and research site directly contributes to the quality of the research. For

reasons of practicality and constraints of time, the interviews in this study were universally conducted over the phone. While this means that all interactions were subject to equal conditions, none of the interactions was in my view optimal. Opportunities to observe body language and behaviour, to view the work site of individuals, and to even on a casual basis observe their interaction with others and myself was of necessity lost. While the quality of input I did receive was sufficient for me to fulfill my objectives in conducting this study, I will remain forever oblivious to the other inputs I might have received through in-person data collection.

Further Research

As I conducted the research, many conceptual questions arose that intrigued me and appeared promising to pursue; recognizing the need to complete one study before starting several more, however, I endeavoured to limit the inquiries of this study to answering the questions that I started with. Many more questions since that time have emerged that would also appear worthy of investigation.

This study was consciously designed to support the development of a theory of how personal influences support the project initiation process. This inherently focusses upon one type of decision within organizations, and explores the dimensions of decision making and the influence of agency only within that context. A number of related aspects of decision making would be interesting to explore in more detail in the context of the findings of this study. In particular, the dimensions of strategic planning, the negotiation of organizational priorities, and the execution of projects would be interesting areas to explore in greater detail. While the mechanics of the processes of each of these areas have been evaluated in many studies, there has been comparatively less focus on the personal influences of individuals involved in or responsible for those processes.

Of equal interest would be the exploration of the role that agency contributes to these processes, and the operative dimensions of agency that influence different results in these decision processes. It would also be interesting to understand the role and impact of agency in the project management process in general, in influencing how project managers (as well as project sponsors, steering committee members, team members and other stakeholders) approach their role. The interactions of politics do not

begin when there is an initiation decision is to be made, and they do not end once a project has initiated. The shifting of roles, the adaptations of politics and the influence of process through the lifecycle of a project from strategy through to delivered result, and beyond to benefits realization, would be intriguing, if challenging, areas of exploration.

With respect to agency, many more related questions have arisen as a result of this study. Not only is the possession of agency a personal attribute, but the exercising of agency is a very personal choice. Some participants actively sought opportunities for flexibility and positively revelled in the opportunity to work outside of the rule system of their organizations, while others resolutely and contentedly remained with the rule confines in theirs. This raises a number of follow-up questions, including:

- Why do some individuals pursue and cultivate the development of personal agency? What are the motivators to consciously step out from the constraints of the current rule system?
- Why do other individuals accept the limitations of agency? What are the motivators that lead otherwise motivated and successful individuals to work within and accept the constraints imposed upon their role?
- What inspires (and sometimes compels) individual actors to pursue contrary strategies outside of the sanctioned rule system within an organization?
- What are the circumstances where the exercising of strong agency is appropriate and/or condoned?
- What are the circumstances where the exercising of agency is inappropriate?
- What are the strategies for the development of personal agency, and in what circumstances are they most effective?
- What are the barriers or disablers of developing personal agency?

It is clear from conducting this study that the concept of agency has as much influence in the successful initiation of projects as do the far better understood and more exhaustively researched areas of process and politics. Continuing to investigate the role of agency, strategies for development and guidelines for its responsible utilization could be very relevant and fruitful indeed.

Personal Implications

I entered into this research with a number of beliefs and pre-formed assumptions about how the process of project initiation actually works within organizations. These perspectives were not simply the product of a literature review, but were formed over more than two decades of working with organizations in the development of strategic plans, the prioritization and selection of project opportunities, and the management and delivery of projects. As an avid student in the school of life, I had studied closely the operations of many organizations in a variety of sectors, industries and disciplines.

I am therefore surprised—and perhaps in equal measure elated and chagrined—at many of the results that have emerged from this study. The research began with a desire to explore the degree of intersection that exists between personal and organizational dynamics in the project initiation process. This is a grey middle space that exists between strategic management and project management; it is one that both sides of the equation recognize, but upon which neither has shed much light. Going into the research, I expected that personal influences existed, that the influences were shaped by individual and personal biases, and that through understanding these biases they could be compensated for to more effectively support project initiation.

A related bias of mine has been that while personality is an indicator, it is not a determinant. While our personalities may influence our preferences in how we approach situations, they are not necessarily determinants of ultimate success. It was a surprise to me, therefore, that one of the observations within the analysis is that those actors who favour a particular personality type are more likely to develop strong levels of agency. While the idea that those who have strong levels of agency are more likely to attribute that agency to personal qualities, and that those with less agency are more apt to see external barriers, to have this distinction appear so cleanly, and in doing so be strongly attributable to personality, was a surprise. While there are aspects of this finding that parallel the law of attribution, long viewed as a fundamental principle of social psychology, I did not have an expectation that this would result in one personality type being more inclined to exercise agency than another. What I do wonder, and what will have to await further research, is whether awareness of this fact can help individuals

to develop strategies to better develop agency, regardless of (or perhaps tailored to) the qualities of their underlying preferences.

Secondly, coming in to this research I was unaware of the presence of social rule systems as a theoretical framework for understanding the configuration and evolution of behaviours within organizations. I stumbled upon this fascinating area of the decision making literature through exploring the works of Cyert, March and Simon, which are so foundational to our understanding of decision making behaviour in organizations. The publication of the book “*A Behavioural Theory of the Firm*,” by Cyert and March (1963/1992) first introduced the concept of decision making as a product of organizational routines and rules. The theory of social rules systems that has subsequently been developed, particularly through the research of Tom Burns and his colleagues (Burns & Dietz, 1992; Burns & Flam, 1987; Dietz & Burns, 1992; Dietz, Burns, & Buttel, 1990; Machado & Burns, 1998), provides a significant and important means of understanding the dynamics within organizations, and particularly those that are operating beneath the surface. It is an area of research that has been less emphasized in the literature since its introduction, but is one that I view as being a significant and worthwhile topic of continued exploration and research.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Case Study Description

Part A

This case study is a fictionalized case in decision making, based upon a decision scenario within a large organization. The organization in question is under significant pressure from its board of directors to improve the productivity and efficiency of its operations, and to provide more proactive and comprehensive strategies for the management of operations within the organization. Extensive consultations have been underway at the executive level to evaluate current organizational performance and identify potential gaps. The objective is to develop a coherent strategic plan and identify essential strategic initiatives (projects) that will enable the organization to position itself for long-term success.

The results of the gap analysis have highlighted the need for a significant enhancement to the collection, management and utilization of financial and process data within the organization. As a result, the implementation of a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system has been identified as one of the priority strategic initiatives that is being considered within the organization. This will require extensive review and enhancement of core processes within the organization, customization and implementation of the ERP system, extensive data conversation efforts and a broad organizational change program that will provide the training, support and skill development necessary for the new system to be utilized throughout the organization.

Currently, this initiative is at a very early conceptual stage. While the need to consider an ERP system has been flagged as a strategic priority, there is very little information on what this would look like, the work that would be involved or what the final solution would look like. The information available regarding this initiative is a one-paragraph recommendation in a larger consulting report that has just been presented to the organization's executive committee. The essential recommendations highlight:

- The need to document and improve the processes associated with product, service and program delivery.

- An expectation of a comprehensive means of managing and monitoring workload, customer demand and resource utilization.
- Significant enhancements of costing, budgeting, financial tracking and reporting capabilities in each division and business unit, and for each product, service and program area.
- Corresponding increases in the accuracy and reliability of forecasts, budgets and financial projections for the organization.

Part B

You have recently been advised that you have been assigned responsibility for leading the investigation and development of this initiative. This will require overseeing the initiation of the initiative, expanding on the very little information that exists today to explore what such an initiative would mean for the organization, how it would need to be approached, who would be involved and the strategy for its development and implementation. Ultimately, this will require making a formal submission and presentation to the executive committee for their review and approval. You will need to work quickly to develop and present a submission on an urgent basis.

Appendix B – Initial Interview Protocol

1. Demographics

What is your current position/role within your organization?

How long have you been in your current position?

How long have you been with your organization?

What is your overall work experience to date?

What is your typical involvement in how project initiation decisions are made within your organization?

What are the roles that you typically perform in initiating projects?

What industry do you work in?

What is the size of your organization? (# of employees; # of locations; revenue)

How large is the executive team within the organization?

2. Initial Understanding

Please read Part A of the provided case description.

Please provide a brief overview of your understanding of the case.

Prompting questions:

- How realistic is it?
- How similar is it to work you have been involved with in the past?
- How comprehensive a project would this be?
- How large/how long a project would this be?

3. Initiation Process

Please describe what the initiation process would look like for an initiative like this, based upon your understanding and experience.

Prompting questions:

- What would happen next?
- What would the process of initiating a project of this scale look like?
- How long would an initiation process like this take to complete?
- Where would it start? Where would it finish?

4. Project Shaping Role

Please read Part B of the provided case description.

Please describe how you would approach this role in your organization.

Prompting questions:

- How would you approach an assignment of this nature? What would you do first?
- Who would you typically involve on your team? Who would you not typically involve?
- Who would you typically consult with? Who would you not typically consult with?
- What roles would you play in managing an initiation process like this?
- What deliverables would be produced?
- How would the information be presented to the executive team?
- How would the decision be arrived at in whether to proceed?
- Who would make the decision?

5. Specific Questions

Please answer the following questions based upon how you would approach a similar initiative within your organization:

Process

How formally is the process defined in how such a project initiation process would be managed?

How consistently is the process of project initiation adhered to?

How formal is the analysis of decisions such as this?

To what extent does the analysis and deliverables that result from the initiation process that you have described influence the decision-making process?

In decisions like this, to what degree is the need for analysis and investigation recognized and supported? To what extent is there a tendency to proceed forward and commit to action?

To what extent does project initiation as you see it practice emphasize the need to understand the problem in detail before prescribing or recommending a solution?

Political & Social Influences

What is necessary to ensure political and group alignment on initiation decisions like this?

Who typically has influence in decisions of this nature? How is that influence exercised?

How is participation of relevant areas of the organization facilitated in supporting the project initiation process?

What is the influence of politics on project initiation situations such as this? How are politics typically exercised in such situations?

How is uncertainty and ambiguity managed in project initiation situations?

How does lack of support among stakeholders get identified and addressed?

Personal Power

When involved in a role like this, how do you establish your credibility and influence?

How do you manage and maintain your reputation and position when taking on similar roles?

How do you engage with others and develop coalitions when performing similar roles?

Clarity of Result

How do you make sure that the solution being recommended is appropriate and reasonable?

What steps do you take to ensure acceptance of the solution?

Value

What is required to demonstrate the value of an initiative like this?

How do you make sure that there is acceptance and agreement on the proposed value of a solution like this?

How important is ensuring that the value of a project like this is tangible? How much influence do intangible values have?

Management of Change

How do you recognize and accommodate changes to approach and solution when they emerge in similar situations?

How do you ensure acceptance of changes when they occur?

Decision Rules

What are the stated and explicit rules about how projects like this get initiated?

To what extent are there implicit or 'understood' rules about how projects like this get initiated?

How do the 'rules of the game' regarding project initiation get understood?

How stable are the 'rules of the game'?

How often do the 'rules of the game' change? What prompts changes? How do you become aware of changes?

Initiation Role

Discussing the role of managing the initiation process discussed in the case study that you reviewed:

Is this a typical role within your organization?

To the extent that the role exists, how are people assigned to it?

How do other executives interact with someone in this role?

Appendix C – Alignment Of Interview Questions With Literature Review

Reference	Consideration	Question
		Process
Langley 1995	Excessive analysis or insufficient analysis in supporting decisions	How formally is the process defined in how such a project initiation process would be managed?
Mintzberg et al 1976	Processes are novel, complex and open ended	How consistently is the process of project initiation adhered to?
Langley 1991	Formal analysis not used to explore problems but to coalesce around solution	How formal is the analysis of decisions such as this?
March 1972	Documents serve as justification and interpretation, not predictor	To what extent does the analysis and deliverables that result from the initiation process that you have described influence the decision-making process?
Fredrickson 1985, Eisenhardt 1989	Processes are oversimplified; executives think and act simultaneously	In decisions like this, to what degree is the need for analysis and investigation recognized and supported? To what extent is there a tendency to proceed forward and commit to action?
Nutt 1984b Fredrickson 1984b	Tendency for new technology solutions to result in search for problems Strategic processes motivated by reactive rather than proactive behaviours	To what extent does project initiation as you see it practice emphasize the need to understand the problem in detail before prescribing or recommending a solution?
		Political & Social Influences
Simon 1965 Fredrickson 1984b, 1986	Evocation is critical in ensuring support and directing attention Decisions require participation from people with broad range of expertise and different levels	What is necessary to ensure political and group alignment on initiation decisions like this?
Mintzberg et al 1976 Eisenhardt & Bourgeois 1988	Political activities used as a vehicle for clarifying power relationships Political alliances tend to endure and allies tend to be constant even as issues change	Who typically has influence in decisions of this nature? How is that influence exercised?
Machado & Burns 1998	Actors are participants in multiple networks, draw on different rules in different contexts	How is participation of relevant areas of the organization facilitated in supporting the project initiation process?
Mintzberg et al 1976	Political activities used as a vehicle for clarifying power relationships	What is the influence of politics on project initiation situations such as this? How are politics typically exercised in such situations?
Pfeffer, Salancik and Leblebci 1976	Social influence is a significant impact in the presence of uncertainty	How is uncertainty and ambiguity managed in project initiation situations?
Brunsson 1982 Brunsson 1986	Differences between private thoughts and public expression result in conflicts and misunderstanding Hypocrisy is used as a means of managing different expectations	How does lack of support among stakeholders get identified and addressed?
		Personal Power
Clegg 2006	Power is an essential construct	When involved in a role like this, how do you

	in creating commitment with other actors	establish your credibility and influence?
Brunsson 1990	Decision makers with high personal legitimacy afford legitimacy to actions	How do you manage and maintain your reputation and position when taking on similar roles?
Brunsson 1982	Decision makers must also act and induce others to act	How do you engage with others and develop coalitions when performing similar roles?
		Clarity of Result
Nutt 1984b	Appropriate definition of problem and scope is critical to decision making	How do you make sure that the solution being recommended is appropriate and reasonable?
Tushman, Virany and Romanelli 1985	Management of change requires sensitivity to the organization's state of willingness to change	What steps do you take to ensure acceptance of the solution?
		Value
Lindblom 1959	Decision making requires that ends are agreed upon, reconcilable and stable	What is required to demonstrate the value of an initiative like this?
March 1978a	Ambiguity is a problem of relevance, priority and clarity of goals at individual levels	How do you make sure that there is acceptance and agreement on the proposed value of a solution like this?
Cyert et al 1956	Decision makers tend to overemphasize tangible over intangible goals	How important is ensuring that the value of a project like this is tangible? How much influence do intangible values have?
		Management of Change
Mintzberg & Waters 1985	Decision makers require flexibility of approach and a willingness to revisit decisions and their premises	How do you recognize and accommodate changes to approach and solution when they emerge in similar situations?
Tushman, Virany and Romanelli 1985	Management of change requires sensitivity to the organization's state of willingness to change	How do you ensure acceptance of changes when they occur?
		Decision Rules
Burns & Dietz 1992 Dietz & Burns 1992	Rule provide a framework that defines expectations and required behaviours in specific contexts. Rules have emerged that frame decision making processes in every context of modern life.	What are the stated and explicit rules about how projects like this get initiated?
Brunsson 1993	Rules are implemented according to written or unwritten rules that required little active mobilization; this also led to challenges in changing or evolving routines.	To what extent are there implicit or 'understood' rules about how projects like this get initiated?
Burns & Dietz 1992	Actors are "programmed" by the culture, and their ability to operate is limited by these constraints	How do the 'rules of the game' regarding project initiation get understood?
Nelson &	Rules are resistant to change	How stable are the 'rules of the game'?

Winter 2002	due to effort, cost and the potential for re-opening previous conflicts.	
Burns & Dietz 1992	The reproductive success of any rule system is measured in terms of its fitness: successful practices will be those that tend to spread.	How often do the 'rules of the game' change? What prompts changes? How do you become aware of changes?
		Initiation Role
Smith & Winter 2010	Role of project shaper as playing a significant role in supporting the initiation of projects.	Discussing the role of managing the initiation process discussed in the case study that you reviewed:
		Is this a typical role within your organization?
		To the extent that the role exists, how are people assigned to it?
		How do other executives interact with someone in this role?